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The
Magic
in this Other World
is Too Far Behind!

Gamei Hitsuji
illustration=Yuunagi

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“Jetzt kommen, mein
süßlicher Teddybär.”

[Now come, my cute teddy bear.]

With a poof typical of stage magic,

a teddy bear wearing a pointed hat appeared out of thin air.

It was only about the size of a soccer ball to start,

but growing larger and larger with every blink of the eye.

Hydemy Alzbayne



“Abreq ad Habra.”

[Hurl your thunderbolt
even unto death.]

“Dico.
[I hereby declare.]

Illa qui impediunt me, tu es illa qui indignantur me.
[All who stand in my path, thou art those who resent me.]

Ergo, tu es mea mors.
[Thus, thou art none other than my greatest obstacle, my death.]

Itaque, o fulgur caeruleum. O locum id adducit.
[So, oh pale lightning. Oh destination where it arrives.]

O illa qui conligant praeter me. Dissipato prae mea fulgur—”
[Scatter to the winds before my lightning—]

Yakagi Suimei



“NOM!”

**THIS IS
YOUR FAULT
FOR STEALING
MY CHOCOLATE,
SUIMEI-DONO!”**

Felmenia Stingray

“OM!”

*“H-Hey!
Menia! The hell
are you doing?!”*
**HEY! YOU’RE
DROOLING ON
MY FINGER!”**



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The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind!

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Illustration: Yuunagi

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Prologue: Far, Far Away, Beyond the Distance

Something suddenly drew nearer... Was it footsteps? Rustling clothes? It wasn't even clear if the approaching presence was alive, though that only stood to reason.

This place had no substance; it was but a morphic space without form. It was like being in the dark of the ocean depths and a blindingly bright light at the same time. Its nature depended entirely on the person observing it. If one believed it to be pitch black, then it was so. If one believed it to be blindingly bright, then it was so. Whether you wished to see a throne or empty space, it may be so... For this place contained all creation.

The throne of god. The astral plane. The valley. It goes by many names, but this is where divinity made its home. It is where one such divine being—Alshuna, the goddess who ruled over the world that had summoned Suimei and his friends—resided.

Her power was such that the very nature of this place bent to her whims. When she wished for it to be a solemn temple, then it was so. Space itself distorted and rippled like water, and before long, the amorphous scenery had sculpted itself in the Goddess's vision.

Enormous white pillars held up a high ceiling, and something resembling an altar took shape. Stained glass filled the windows, coloring the light that poured through them. The space now appeared as the inner sanctum of a temple, but it lacked a central statue in the Goddess's image. In its place was a chair with a lone woman in a white dress seated atop it.

She had her eyes closed and her chin resting in the palm of her hand, as if drifting in and out of slumber. She had a royal scepter at her side. No, perhaps it was fairer to say a divine scepter. When wrought by the hands of man, a scepter was a symbol of authority. But when wrought by divinity that transcends man, just what did it signify?

Here the Goddess waited, as if watching a dream.

And just as the altar had manifested, the approaching presence also took form. The sounds of footsteps on a wooden floor, rustling clothes, and breathing were all now distinct. And when she heard them, the Goddess Alshuna slowly, faintly opened her eyes and courteously greeted the spirit who stepped forward.

“You’ve done well to come here, servant of my blood.”

Long, black hair. Asian skin. A schoolgirl’s blazer. A red muffler around her neck. Fingerless gloves on both hands. It appeared to be Anou Mizuki, but it was only obvious that a normal high school girl had not come to this place. It simply looked like her.

Anou Mizuki—or rather, the spirit who took her form—reverently kneeled before Alshuna.

“O Great Mother of Creation, please forgive my insolence in awakening you from thy slumber.”

“Do you think me so petty that I would anger merely over being awoken?”

“Certainly not, though it’s said that a god once smashed the world over the offense.”

Alshuna seemed to guess where the spirit had come by this foreign knowledge, and looked at her with a tranquil expression.

“Did you learn that from the girl whose body you borrowed?”

“Indeed.”

“And that figure... Is that also hers?”

“Yes. I possess no form of my own as Ishaktney’s child does, which is likely why I appear before you here in this fashion.”

“I see your tone has also conformed to hers.”

“Indeed. I thought it would only be appropriate in this form,” the spirit boasted with a grin as it burst into laughter.

If Mizuki had been there to see it, she undoubtedly would’ve turned bright red and flared up on the spot. Using such grandiose speech was part of a dark past that she’d long put behind her.

“However, I do believe I commanded you to assist and monitor that one, didn’t I?” Alshuna said with an inquisitive tone.

“Well... an unexpected hindrance got in the way and, as you can see, I was forcibly returned to the valley. I am profoundly ashamed to appear before you without completing my mission.”

“You mean to say there’s someone out there capable of expelling you from the world?”

“It was done at the hands of those fools who do not

comprehend thine affection, O Great Mother.”

“You speak of those summoned by the call across worlds? Certainly, my affection cannot reach them,” Alshuna said, her tranquil expression tinged with both astonishment and resignation. “Humans of their world all possess strong ‘thoughts’ and ‘wills.’ But precisely because of that, that which they long for is too much for them to handle.”

“Is it so foolish to mistake the glimmer of ideals for the light of hope?”

“Such misunderstandings bring other factors into play... It is a most complicated matter.”

“Certainly.”

The spirit bowed its head in agreement with Alshuna’s statement, and Alshuna looked upon the spirit with a transparent gaze.

“How is that one doing now?”

From just that simple phrase, “that one,” the spirit knew precisely who Alshuna meant.

“He is at last becoming accustomed to thy power, O Great Mother. However...”

“Is something troubling you?”

“I’m afraid he’s acclimating *too* quickly.”

“Hmm... If he were to come here, it would be about half the stars’ blessings. I see... So, what stage is he at now?”

“He’s currently in the second stage. The unification of consciousness has just begun. Normally, this wouldn’t occur until after gradually becoming accustomed to thy power and receiving the stars’ blessings, but... because of this, it seems he’s easily swayed by extraneous words.”

“You mean to say you’ve witnessed occasions where he’s been swayed by the words of outsiders?”

“They were but words spoken by those fools upon coming in contact with him, yet it seems they’ve taken a firm root in his heart.”

“It seems his bewilderment is coming to a head as a result of acclimating to my power too quickly... Do you have any idea as to the cause for this?”

“His ‘thoughts’ are far too strong... Also, I believe it may be an influence of the weapon brought from the other world.”

Alshuna listened to the fragmented pieces of information the

spirit presented her and closed her eyes slightly to ponder them.

“The Sacrament, that weapon created to deny the approaching end... Are you saying it guides him?”

“I cannot say so for certain right now, but there is no denying that it has a strong influence over him. If the unification of consciousness were to begin now, I fear it may tear him between conflicting demands.”

“How troublesome...”

“Indeed.”

There was a conflict between his emotions and the duty Alshuna had imprinted in him, meaning there was a danger of him moving counter to her will. But that wasn't even the worst of it. At the rate things were proceeding, there was a distinct possibility that he wouldn't be able to bear the push and pull of conflicting desires, which might drive him to make an even more dangerous choice.

Neither the Goddess's will nor the Sacrament could change the world the way he would want. And once he could bear that no longer, he would inevitably put his mind to changing the world himself. The danger, then, was who—or what—may be exerting their influence over him.

“I'll have you return to his side. Guide him so that no extraneous influences delude him.”

“Then shall I once more borrow this girl as a vessel? If we overdo the possession, it will impose an irreversible burden on her body.”

“Yet I seem to recall that she had the appropriate disposition for the task...”

“Her soul, certainly. But the mind and body of one who has yet to fully mature are delicate.”

Though the spirit presented its concerns over further possession, Alshuna's assessment of the girl in question was most accurate. Her body was healthy and her mind was surprisingly open to mystical influence. But the fact remained that possession left gaps in a vessel's memory, not to mention the stress and anxiety it caused.

Now that the spirit had been driven out, the girl's consciousness had returned and she was keenly aware of the lapse in her memory. Should she be possessed again—and again and again—it would be the cause of endless terror. Such a fate was difficult to cope with, even for those more mature than her tender age. The end result of

being worn down with the constant anxiety of uncertainty and the confusion of missing memories... It left one's mind crippled.

The spirit found this far too pitiful. The girl in question was a kind, sweet soul, and it would be unbecoming of a guide to foist such a cruel fate upon her. However, the Goddess seemed to be of a different opinion...

"So be it. It is for the sake of protecting this world from all that threatens it. Sacrifices must be made."

"..."

That was the Goddess's decree: sacrifices must be made. It was something the spirit had known full well from the very beginning.

"I understand your reservations, but should the world end, then *all* will be lost. Do you disagree?"

"...It is just as you say."

"You hesitated."

"M-My deepest apologies..."

The spirit was afflicted with a deep chill upon hearing Alshuna's reprimanding voice. It was only natural that she showed no mercy. If a spirit born of Alshuna opposed her, it went without saying that it would be immediately absorbed back into the Great Mother of Creation.

The spirit understood that it had incurred the Goddess's displeasure and stiffened up on the spot. However, the next words to come from the Goddess's mouth were far gentler than expected.

"I shall leave your response just now unquestioned. As I said, you will once more return to his side. Everything after that... I leave to your discretion."

"All is as the Great Mother wills."

Upon declaring its allegiance, the spirit prepared to take its leave. It was then that the Goddess interjected...

"I have just one more thing to tell you."

"What is it, O Great Mother?"

"Be sure to keep a watchful eye on that one's friend."

"His friend? Do you mean my riv— Pardon, do you mean the caster from the other world?"

"Precisely. Be especially careful when he approaches that one."

The spirit pondered Alshuna's words. It had personally conversed with the caster several times now and didn't think that he required such vigilance. Neither his abilities nor his ideals struck the spirit as potential threats.

“O Great Mother. If I may speak candidly, I do not believe that boy warrants such caution. It is certainly true that he possesses great power, but he is still a child of man. That one will surely surpass him sooner or later.”

“It is not merely his power that we need be wary of.”

“You mean to say he may also mislead that one?”

“The closer he gets, the more he’ll have his ear. Both he and the girl are a tremendous influence on him.”

The spirit recalled the interactions it had witnessed between Suimei and Reiji. It was true that they respected each other’s opinions. Reiji depended on Suimei’s pragmatism and Suimei revered Reiji’s unrelenting righteousness. In a certain sense, they balanced one another out. Each had a firm grasp on the other’s heart, keeping them both from straying too far from their respective paths. In short, they each possessed something that the other lacked, complementing each other perfectly.

“As long as that one acclimates to thy power, the extraneous voices shall grow quieter. That, after all, is the true nature of becoming strong. Should the caster fall behind in power, his words will never reach that one.”

Or so the spirit said. But Alshuna shook her head.

“It will not be so simple.”

“...It’s certainly true that the power granted to him is split in four, but even so, I don’t think a mere caster could possibly be a match for him.”

“No. Even if all my power were concentrated in him, he would surely still never surpass that caster.”

The first time the spirit had ever encountered Suimei, it was struck with a strong revulsion. Even if it was with the blessing of one of the Creators, no human should be allowed to surpass the Creators themselves.

“Is he truly so powerful, O Great Mother?”

“Indeed, he is. He possesses a vessel that’s just that exceptional, and a destiny to match. The one to charge him with such a fate surely lies far deeper within the abyss of the truth than even I do.”

“That’s...”

“That’s why we must be careful. For that one to surpass the caster—to even catch up with him—he must rely on that weapon. And in doing so...”

“It will exert all the more influence over him.”

"If that's all that comes of it, then so be it. However, that weapon possesses a devilishness that takes advantage of the greed of man."

"It takes advantage of greed?"

"It's all connected to the Source. That weapon uses the desires of its wielder as an offering to grant them power, and the weapon craves those desires ad infinitum. It thirsts for ever-increasing greed from its wielder, whispering temptation in their ears."

"..."

"We've gone off topic," the Goddess said after a brief pause. "Remember this for now: that young caster has driven divinity from his world and used his power to forestall the inevitable end. He is also capable of reaching the light."

"The light?"

"The light he used when he saved the girl I bestowed with power from the servant of that fool. But such light is far too much for the body of man, for it is the infinite light that can grant any wish to those who reach out for it. *That* is the light I speak of."

"Wha— And you're saying *he* can reach it?!"

"If the need arises, he will undoubtedly extend his hand. To fulfill the common wish of every being. To pursue that which they all desire to the very best of his abilities... In the not too distant future, the day will surely come when he grasps it."

"How is a mere human capable of such a thing?"

The Goddess narrowed her gaze at the spirit, as if deliberating that very question herself.

"Perhaps because he was allowed."

"By whom?"

"By everything. By that at which all eventually arrives, and from which all is born. Not so different, I imagine, from his destiny."

The spirit could not comprehend the meaning behind the Goddess's words; they were far too abstract. And perhaps sensing the spirit's bewilderment, the Goddess reaffirmed her earlier statement.

"Do you hear me? Be wary of that caster from the other world. If you draw too near him, you will also come to find him dazzling."

The spirit answered Alshuna with a bow. It, of course, had no intention of refuting her. After all, it had already had the occasion to catch a glimpse of exactly what she meant.

Chapter 1: Back Home

There exists a theory that states the world is an infinite existence. This doesn't refer to the physical space of the world, but rather the number of worlds within "the world" at large. Such worlds are called parallel worlds, as they exist parallel to one another in the image of a master world. They could also be called counterfeit worlds, in that sense.

For example, people who are alive and well on Earth may not even exist on a parallel Earth. Or a policeman who lives his life in the righteous light of day might be a criminal lurking in the dark underbelly of society in a parallel world. To take it to the very extreme, the roll of a single die could have six different results in six different parallel worlds.

For every "something someone did," for every "something that happened," for every "what if," and for every regret, every changed mind, and every wish for things to play out differently... an entirely new parallel world was given form.

Now, the existence of separate worlds is a completely distinct theory from that of parallel worlds, though perhaps such worlds could also be called counterfeits...

Blue sparks flickered into the air atop the lawn of a certain mansion garden. But the dancing phosphorescence illuminating the area was no natural phenomenon. No, it was the light of mana.

The lights crawled across the ground in lines, drawing geometric patterns within a circle. At first, what looked like a rogue current that escaped the bounds of electrical resistance shot out of the ground. It then grew in brilliance, making it impossible to tell it was the dead of night.

The light eventually grew dimmer and dimmer, and when it died down enough, five silhouettes could be seen standing atop the circle: one man and four women.

The ritual in front of Suimei's residence in the other world was successfully completed and the teleportation circle had activated without incident. Suimei, Felmenia, Lefille, Liliana, and Hatsumi

were now safely transported to Suimei's home world.

And so Suimei took his first step in a very familiar garden. It lay behind the house it shared a lot with, running quite contrary to the typical Japanese trend of having a single garden in the front yard. It was made to mimic a Western park, including the brick sidewalk that ran through it. There were also garden chairs and tables, manicured hedges, and even a small gazebo further within.

The brick sidewalk was uneven after some bricks had sunken in more than others. Spots of rotten wood were visible on the table and chairs from prolonged exposure to the elements. And the frosty gray gazebo in the back was slowly being overtaken by ivy.

There were several plaster dolls placed around the garden as if to liven up the place. They looked like the kind that might start moving once night fell, but little did the casual observer know they were made to move day or night. They were traps strategically placed around the garden on purpose, making this garden perhaps the most dangerous place in the entire estate.

Suimei turned around to face the rather stately Yakagi mansion. It was a Queen Anne-style house with hints of Meiji and Taisho era architecture. The entire building was decorated with medallions as a ward against evil spirits, and even had a small tower to top it all off.

Suimei's gaze, however, drifted towards the veranda. Through the frosted glass, he could see the vague contour of a rocking chair inside.

I'm really back.

Homesickness had long taken root in Suimei's heart, and relief welled up in his chest upon seeing his father's rocking chair.

The sun had been shining when Suimei and the girls departed the other world, but it was the dead of night here in Japan.

The time is different...

Realizing that, a sudden anxiety assaulted him. It wasn't as though he hadn't predicted this possibility, but there was nothing that could be done about it now.

Suimei would be thankful if any errors in his calculations merely amounted to a small time discrepancy. But if they added up to something larger, that would be a very serious problem indeed. If time passed differently between this world and the other, Suimei's home world very well may have left him behind. And the bigger the difference was, the further behind he would be.

As Suimei prayed in his heart that he wouldn't become a real-life Urashima Taro, he could hear an excited voice behind him.

"It's really... bright."

It was Liliana, who was looking out of the garden and towards the city. Her usually half-open, sleepy eye was like a saucer. The other two visitors, Felmenia and Lefille, were similarly wide-eyed.

Once night fell in the other world, it was essentially pitch black outside. The only beacons in the dark were the moon, the stars, and the occasional manmade fire. Major cities had mana lamps here and there, but they were largely used to safeguard public order where nobles lived. They weren't found just anywhere.

But things were different in this world. Japan in particular had exterior lights all over, and the local streets were often illuminated with warm light flooding out of neighborhood homes. Even in the dead of night, it was never really dark.

This was especially true looking towards town from the Yakagi estate, which sat on a slightly elevated lot. It had a terrific view of the city—an especially remarkable sight to anyone who had never seen such a thing before.

Lefille suddenly looked up to the sky, as if drawn by something.

"Suimei-kun, there's a light moving up there... Is that a star?"

"That? Nah, pretty sure that's an airplane—a vehicle that carries people around."

"That's a vehicle?!"

"B-But Suimei-dono, isn't that quite far up?!"

"Yeah, I guess it is. The takeoff and landing zones are pretty far apart, so I'm pretty sure they get up to altitudes over ten thousand meters."

"T-Ten thousand...?"

Suimei had already taught his three visitors the colloquial units of measurement, so they were aghast to hear him say the plane was so high up in the air. Lefille turned to Hatsumi for confirmation, and she gave her an affirmative nod.

"So that's... a machine, was it? Those things made of very intricate devices?"

"Yeah. There are things like that all over this world."

The three girls stared in wonderment at the city and the airplane a while longer before finally turning around to get a look at the building behind them.

"So is this your house, Suimei-dono?"

Suimei nodded at Felmenia's question, and the three visitors once again stood there staring in astonishment.

"It's quite large, isn't it?"

"It sure is big."

"It's... really... huge."

"...Right?"

Of the girls, Hatsumi was the only one whose tone had an edge of exasperation.

"Is it?"

Suimei had lived in this house ever since he was born, so its size didn't particularly impress him. He knew it occupied somewhat more land than the other houses in the area and was somewhat more lavishly made, but it didn't hold a candle to the luxurious properties people had overseas. Over in America, even normal people lived in absurdly large homes.

So for Suimei, whose mystical work had him flying all around the world, the girls' surprise upon seeing his house was beyond his comprehension. Unable to ignore his typical obliviousness, Hatsumi let out an astonished sigh.

"A normal house doesn't typically have a third floor, you know?"

"Oh, right."

"Um, Suimei-dono, is your estate not larger than Duke Hadorious's?"

"If you count the garden, his place is probably bigger. But I guess we might have more floor space here, huh?" Suimei replied in a frivolous tone.

At this, Lefille began rubbing her brow.

"Suimei-kun, is your family perhaps quite rich?"

"Well, our wealth is commensurate with our family history, I guess," Suimei said with a shrug as though it were no big deal.

Hatsumi followed up by elbowing him in the side.

"Lefille-san, don't listen to this liar. Pretty much all the lots in this neighborhood belong to Suimei's family."

"The entire neighborhood?"

"Yeah. If not for that, there's no way we could've gotten a house built right next to his so quickly."

Hatsumi looked over to the neighboring house as if to guide everyone's gaze. Right next door, you see, was the Kuchiba residence. In stark contrast to the Yakagi mansion, it was of a

thoroughly Japanese design. Furthermore, it even had a dojo attached to it. The plot it occupied was considerable, and the house itself was also quite large.

Needless to say, Felmenia and the others were amazed by it as well.

“So you really are rich...”

“Well, magicians need both land and money.”

Just as Suimei claimed, both wealth and land were important to magicians. A certain purchasing power was necessary to acquire the tools and resources required for magical study. Moreover, rituals differed greatly depending on factors such as geography and feng shui. Acquiring suitable land was a top priority, and that took money too. In short, it was an absolute necessity for magicians to maintain a certain level of affluence. In a way, they were the very antithesis of humble storybook heroes content with noble poverty.

Suddenly out of nowhere, the sound of a revving engine cut across the yard. Seemingly surprised by what she assumed to be an explosion, Liliana’s body trembled with a start. She then turned towards the direction of the sound.

“What was... that? It seems like... it’s getting... farther away.”

“Eh, that was probably some hotrod. Or maybe a souped-up bike. It’s pretty normal to hear loud noises like that around here, so you don’t really need to pay them much mind, okay?”

Giving it some thought upon returning home, Suimei realized that the other world was rather quiet. It was unusual for there to be a racket unless there was an emergency or notable celebration. Meanwhile, this world was filled with noise at all hours of the day. Suimei hadn’t really felt that way before, but he was keenly aware of it now that he’d been away for some time.

And as such reflections occupied his mind, Hatsumi let out a sigh of relief. Taking a closer look at her, there was no longer any trace of tension whatsoever in her face. It seemed it had finally sunk in...

“We’re really back, huh?”

“Yeah, though it’s honestly kinda weird *that’s* what hit it home.”

“Seriously. A roaring muffler just lacks elegance.”

Hatsumi puffed out her cheeks in resentment like an unspeakable irritation had welled up within her. But it didn’t last long. She abruptly deflated her cheeks and, without warning,

leaned against Suimei's chest.

"Hey now... What's with this all of a sudden?"

"...I'm just really glad. We're back. I thought this might never happen. That I might never see my mom again. So..."

"Yeah."

Hatsumi was letting out all the anxiety that had been mounting within her, and Suimei gently stroked her head as she vented. The words spilling from her mouth laid bare how touched she really was, and her golden hair fluttered as if brushed by a wave of emotion. That was just how happy she was to be home.

But just then...

A sudden burst of mana could be felt coming from the house.

"That's—!"

"!"

Felmenia and Liliana immediately jumped to action upon sensing the sudden accumulation of mana. They took on combat postures with shrewd movements and let their own mana overflow without hesitation. Even as the source of the manaburst drew their gazes, they kept a vigilant watch on their surroundings. Both girls were prepared for the possibility that the burst of mana was just a decoy. Their precise, tactful reactions were exactly what you'd expect from two seasoned mages... No, magicians.

As for the sole resident of the house, Suimei was languidly scratching his head with a sigh. He wasn't surprised at this turn of events, and he certainly wasn't alarmed. The gentle rosewood aroma wafting over the garden alone told him that the source of the mana wasn't an enemy.

The atmosphere that fell over the area felt heavy, as if everything was being crushed by the weight of the unidentified mana. Looking at it closely, the black of night even appeared to be tinged with a deep, violet, magickal hue.

A pronounced shadow, slightly darker than the night itself, slipped out the back door of the Yakagi mansion. As it did, Suimei placed his hands on Felmenia and Liliana's shoulders, telling them not to worry. They calmed their overflowing mana as the shadow turned into a distinct silhouette and its footsteps drew nearer.

Before long, the silhouette stepped out into the moonlight, revealing what appeared to be a magician. A silk tophat with a red ribbon wrapped around it. A wand tipped with a brilliant gem. A dashing, tailor-fit, ironed tailcoat. The whole ensemble just

screamed magician.

And the one wearing it was an innocent-looking girl about Felmenia's height. She had black hair, and her skin had both the smooth stiffness and lovely luster of porcelain. Her eyes reflected the scant light of night like sparkling gems, and her face was completed with slender eyebrows and a thin nose.



Her face was absolutely expressionless, but her tone and presence made her wrath quite clear.

“SUIMEI-KUN!”

“Yo. Long time no see.”

The girl in the magician’s outfit was none other than Hydemary Alzbayne, Yakagi Suimei’s disciple-cum-assistant-cum-familiar.

“Oh!”

Taking a closer look at the girl who was trembling in anger as she drew nearer, Hatsumi suddenly let out a gasp of realization. She’d met Hydemary once or twice before and recognized her once she could see her clearly.

“Jeez! Where! Exactly! Have! You! Been! All! This! Time?!” Hydemary yelled in an unusually shrill voice. “And what’s this?! You brought back a gaggle of girls?! Explain! Just what’s going on here?!”

Her choice of words made her sound like a hysterical woman who’d just discovered her lover was cheating on her. Hydemary closed in with quick strides, and Suimei immediately threw his hands up in the air as if to surrender.

“Let me say this before anything else: It wasn’t my fault. I’m the victim here.”

“How exactly are *you* the victim, Suimei-kun? Vanishing into thin air without saying a single word to anybody is a complete failure as a high grand class magician, you know?”

“That’s harsh.”

“It’s unforgivable to run off and leave your disciple behind in the dark. Right? Am I saying anything strange here?”

Abandoning all restraint, Hydemary fired off her complaints at Suimei in rapid succession. She’d built up quite a stockpile of ammunition while she was waiting and she was now ready to unload it all at once. She was as expressionless as ever, but Suimei was familiar enough with her body language and tone that he could tell just how angry she really was.

Before he dealt with Hydemary, however, there was something Suimei urgently needed to know.

“Mary, let me ask you something first. Exactly how much time has passed since I broke contact?”

“Half a year! HALF! A! YEAR! You’ve been gone for six months

and thirteen days, Suimei-kun!”

“I see.”

By Suimei’s estimation, that was about how much time he’d spent in the other world. He couldn’t be sure down to the day, but a week or so either way was well within the margin of error. So, upon hearing Hydemary’s answer, a great sense of relief washed over Suimei. She seemed to pick up on the subtle change in his expression.

“What are you so relieved for? That’s not all there is to you being gone, you know? Do you have any idea what kind of effect your disappearance has had all over the—”

“I know, I know...”

“Really? Do you *really* know? Let’s limit the dumb antics to your face, shall we?”

As impertinent as ever, Hydemary didn’t forget to casually throw in an insult for good measure.

Meanwhile, the four other girls were downright astonished by this exchange. You could say that Hydemary had thrown them all for a loop, but they were also stunned by Suimei allowing himself to be so railroaded.

As for Suimei...

“Mary, how did the leader and the others take it?”

“You mean how did the Society react when you vanished? The same as usual, I’d say.”

“Meaning?”

“The leader just said, ‘Well, this kinda thing happens. Vanishing for ten or twenty years is pretty common for magicians. Mhm. Pretty common.’ And Professor Nicolas was all, ‘I predict that the little rascal got caught up in something fun! This is Suimei we’re talking about!’ You know?”

“Hahh...”

Suimei unintentionally let out a sigh. Was the fact that they weren’t all that worried about him good or bad? It at least meant they trusted him to a certain extent, but Suimei was finding it hard to be happy about that under the circumstances.

“Of course, the chairman was in a bad mood.”

“I bet he was.”

The chairman Hydemary mentioned was the one serious figure among the three oldest members of the Society who served as its top brass. It was only obvious that he’d be angry over a sudden

break in contact. Anyone could guess that Suimei had gotten caught up in some sort of incident, but Suimei still had his position to consider.

Suddenly, Hydemary leaned in and brought her face closer to Suimei's. She appeared to be demanding an explanation, but her cuteness severely compromised any intended intimidation.

"So? Where exactly have you been all this time?"

"Uh, you know... Just in another world," Suimei replied rather frankly.

Hydemary's gaze instantly felt colder than a Siberian winter.

"So you finally turned out to be an utter disappointment, huh, Suimei-kun? You've read too much manga and too many light novels, and now you think you're some kind of hero, do you? How sad..."

"Yeah, except I'm totally not kidding. Why don't you take a look at that circle over there? It's pretty neat, you know?"

"What circle? Hmm...? HMM?!"

Hydemary didn't show her emotions on the surface. Or rather, she couldn't. It wasn't as though she didn't possess any; she was simply expressionless. The fact that her eyes shot wide open in surprise now was beyond unusual—it was outright extraordinary.

"Hahh... So even you react to it like that, huh?"

"What is this? It goes beyond the path to the astral plane... No way! There's even a teleportation point set on the other side! What is this?!"

The teleportation circle was completed at the same time as arriving here. It was something like opening a tunnel between the two worlds.

"Is this real? It's not some kind of elaborate trick to cover a mistake you made or anything, Suimei-kun?"

"It's real."

"Wow, now that's amazing. Won't you-know-who go crazy over this? Doesn't it use things like the Fermi paradox and the Drake equation as a running start and then just take off completely?"

"Yup."

"So? What's the meaning of this?"

"I was summoned. And it took a super long time to figure out a way back. A genius like you can more or less figure out the rest, right?"

"Mm. In short, you're a careless idiot who got caught in

someone else's coerced teleportation, right?"

"Don't be unreasonable. There was divine power involved in this. I couldn't do anything about it."

"Says the inhuman jerk who thwarted the apocalypse and drove divinity out of our world? You certainly don't sound like the great magician who keeps racking up achievements that will go down in the annals of magicka right now. Shouldn't you check your humanity before spouting off like that, *Master Suimei*?"

"Don't poke fun at me."

"I'm not really poking fun at you or anything though," Hydemary said, letting out a deliberately loud sigh, though still completely expressionless. Perhaps she was trying to give the impression that she was deeply exasperated by all of this.

"Sorry for troubling you."

"Seriously. I took three laps around the world looking all over for you, you know? Do you hear me? Three. Whole. Laps. If you hadn't shown up tonight, I was just about to go mountain climbing in Antarctica, you know?"

She looked for me that hard?

"...Er, I'll treat you to some candy later."

"You had better."

Hydemary puffed out her chest in resentment. Her behaving like this was a pain for Suimei, but right now, he felt far too guilty to be irritated by it.

Sensing a break in the conversation, Lefille took the opportunity to clear her throat.

"Ahem... Suimei-kun, is now a good time?" she asked with a cough.

"Oh! My bad," he replied.

"Honestly. It's bad manners to ignore everyone else while you railroad the conversation," Hydemary chimed in.

"You really gotta say that kinda crap each and every..."

"Bleh!"

Hydemary stuck her tongue out in response to Suimei's reproachful gaze. Both her verbal abuse and gestures were extremely childlike... Not that that was out of character in her case; she really was a child.

"So does all this mean these girls... are people from another world? And you brought them here? Other than Hatsumi-chan, of course."

"It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Mm. Long time no see, Hatsumi-chan."

There, Hatsumi and Hydemary approached each other and shared greetings. Hydemary played the part of Suimei's friend from overseas whenever she visited his house, so she and Hatsumi had crossed paths before and were well acquainted by now as a matter of course.

"I guess we'll start with introductions," said Suimei, directing everyone's attention to Hydemary in lieu of a host.

He cleared his throat just like Lefille had earlier, and ushered Hydemary to step forward.

"This is Hydemary Alzbayne. She's a magician affiliated with the Society, the same organization I belong to. She's also my disciple."

"Indeed. I'm Hydemary Alzbayne, the genius magician who's more or less serving as Suimei-kun's disciple," she said as she twirled her wand around, took her hat off, and bowed precisely as a stage magician would.

Both Lefille and Felmenia were at a loss for how to respond to such a bold introduction. It wasn't every day that someone proclaimed themselves a genius, after all.

"A g-genius?"

"Is that really something you say about yourself...?"

"I'm extremely, *extremely*, reluctant to admit it, but Mary here is actually a bona fide genius."

"Aren't I amazing? Teehee."

Upon receiving Suimei's endorsement, Hydemary proudly puffed out her chest. Suimei, however, quickly tacked on one last thing.

"Also, she isn't human."

"What...? Suimei-dono, do you mean that in the sense that she's a magician?"

"No, I really mean she's not human. Mary is a so-called manmade lifeform. A homunculus."

"A homunculus?"

"Manmade? You mean to say she was created artificially?"

Felmenia and Lefille were unable to hide their bewilderment upon hearing the word homunculus. But who could blame them? Artificial life was practically unheard of, and those who knew its secrets often avoided it for both practical and moral reasons. After

Suimei briefly explained exactly what homunculi were, however, the girls' bewilderment only increased.

"That all sounds quite... murky."

"I mean... Life is a gift from the Goddess and the fruit of human love. Replicating that with one's own hands is a little..."

Her very existence was difficult for them to accept, yet Hydemary spoke as though she knew nothing of their reluctance.

"Just about the only difference is whether you're grown in a human womb or a test tube. And either way, I'm the result of someone's will to procreate, so what difference does it really make?"

"I see... That's one way of thinking about it..."

"There are those who also subscribe to your way of thinking in this world, but it largely falls under the religious approach to the topic. If they concede to the scientific approach, they feel it would be denying everything they've been taught to believe. And so they reject it under the convenient front of blasphemy."

"Hey, you're getting off track."

Suimei jostled Hydemary's shoulder and interrupted her enthusiastic lecture. He knew she could go on endlessly when it came to philosophical discussions of life.

"But you get it, right?"

"Yeah, I get it. So calm down a bit, okay?"

"Mrrgh..."

Hydemary still had much more to say on the subject, which was only natural as it personally concerned her. Objections to creating life by human hands were tantamount to objections to her very existence. Hydemary was undeniably artificial, but just as she was demonstrating now, she could move, think, and act all on her own. She was very much alive. And she had no interest in hearing that her life and what had created it were wrong.

At last getting back to the introductions, Suimei looked over to Felmenia.

"My name is Felmenia Stingray. I'm currently under Suimeidono's tutelage as his disciple."

"Huh? Ooh! That makes you my junior disciple!"

Hydemary's previous discontent seemed to go flying out the window as she raised an extremely cheerful voice. She practically skipped over to Felmenia, who was visibly confused. Hydemary, on the other hand, was brimming with curiosity.

Upon seeing all this, Lefille leaned in and whispered into Suimei's ear.

"Suimei-kun, this girl can be, um... quite childish, can't she?"

"Well, despite what her appearance suggests, she is actually a child."

"Pardon?"

Suimei decided to spare Lefille the details and leave that discussion for later. There was no rush to get into any of that yet.

"I'm... Liliana Zandyke. Like Felmenia... I have become... Suimei's disciple."

"This girl too?"

Hydemary leaned forward and peered at Liliana's face. Her unreserved stare had Liliana, who wasn't used to dealing with people, immediately recoiling. But for every step she took backward, Hydemary took one forward to keep the distance between them from growing. This cycle repeated itself as they slowly chased each other around the yard.

"U-Um... Uh..."

"No need to be so anxious."

"Augh..."

Liliana reluctantly came to a stop, and Hydemary took the opportunity to observe her from every angle. She was like a photographer who wanted to capture every aspect of her subject. In the end, she even grabbed Liliana's violet hair to inspect it.

"What's gotten into you?" Suimei couldn't help asking.

"Nothing, really. Looking at Liliana-chan just stirred up a little inspiration."

"Ah, of course... But knock it off for now."

Liliana's appearance was incredibly striking, and she had a lot going for her visually. Youthful looks. Gothic lolita fashion from another world. That twintail hairstyle. Even an eyepatch. She was an ideal study for Hydemary, who made dolls as a hobby.

Once he realized what was going on, however, Suimei chided Hydemary as he pulled her away by the arm, forcefully putting an end to her study of Liliana.

"I'm Lefille Grakis. I'm not Suimei-kun's disciple, seeing as I'm not a magician and all, but I guess you could say I'm his companion?"

"Oh?"

At Lefille's introduction, Hydemary demonstrated an entirely

different reaction than she'd had with the other two girls. She stared at Lefille closely as she charmingly cocked her head to the side. She then stepped forward and began poking at Lefille.

"Um..." Lefille muttered in a troubled manner.

Hydemary's behavior was most rude, but her innocent demeanor made it difficult to reprimand her appropriately. Her intense interest in Lefille, however, was perfectly understandable. Any magician in this world would have been equally taken.

"You noticed?" Suimei asked from the side.

"How could I not? Lefille-san, are you...?" Hydemary asked in a perplexed tone.

"A spirit, yes," Lefille answered. "Though, strictly speaking, only a half-spirit."

"This other world sure is amazing. This is legendary stuff here."

Though her face remained expressionless, Hydemary sung great admiration, causing Lefille to knit her brows in response.

"Is it really that impressive? I mean, it's pretty special even back in our world, but..."

"Come now. The very presence of a spirit is incredible, you know? In this world, they vanished from the face of the earth over a hundred years ago."

"But there are techniques to summon them here, right? Using those, it shouldn't be all that difficult to see one."

"Spirit sightings aren't all that uncommon, no. But what's truly special is the way your existence has manifested. A summoning is merely temporary, but that's not the case for you, right? Despite lacking the requisite offering or mana to maintain your presence here, you're not vanishing... Moreover, you also exist as half-human," Hydemary practically cooed with increasing enthusiasm. "It's amazing. You've suddenly gotten me quite curious about this world of yours."

"Th-That's, well... Thank you, I think?"

Lefille seemed a bit bowled over by Hydemary's excitement, but Suimei let out a languid sigh to put a damper on the whole thing.

"But their magicka is kinda..."

"Why the long face? Is it that disappointing?"

"Actually, speaking of... Menia, can you use it here?"

"A moment, please... Yes, it appears to work!"

"That so? Okay, then can you use that one spell you used to cast?"

Suimei urged Felmenia to demonstrate her magic, which immediately put Hatsumi in quite a fluster.

“H-Hang on! You’re planning on using magicka *here*?!”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. It’ll be fine as long as we do it on this property.”

“You’re telling me no one’s going to notice you using magicka here?”

“Yup. I mean, if that wasn’t the case, don’t you think you would’ve found out about it way sooner?”

“...Don’t go performing weird rituals right next to my house.”

“We’re not some cult, damn it. It’s just part of our job as magicians.”

“Well, um, here I go... Truth Flare!”

Felmenia incanted her keywords in a casual tone and activated her spell on the spot. It was only a small invocation, allowing the chant to be omitted. A magicka circle... obviously didn’t show up. Felmenia had cast Truth Flare, a magic spell she’d used in her world before Suimei taught her the ways of magicka.

Nevertheless, a white flame—one just a little hotter than a regular one—danced in the air and illuminated the garden of the Yakagi mansion. The flowers hiding in the dark of night revealed their beautiful colors, and the world around them was suddenly far more vivid than before.

Any normal person would have been in awe of such a mystical and beautiful scene, but what came out of Hydemary’s mouth sounded much closer to disappointment.

“Mm, yeah. It’s kind of... questionable. It seems there’s something mediating with it from the outside, though?”

“It’s a phenomenon of lower-class spirits called the Elements. They’re what’s mediating with the spell.”

“A phenomenon is?”

“It happens, right? You know, *that*. The law of parallel worlds theory.”

“Really? That super abstract theory that states that because other worlds are governed by different laws, phenomena unique to them can still occur here so long as the two worlds are connected?”

“Yup. That’s the one. The Elements are one such ‘law’ that gives rise to unique phenomena in their world.”

“That’s amazing. It was considered a completely empty theory since it was previously impossible to observe other worlds to begin

with, wasn't it?"

"This just proves that it can be actualized."

"That's a big achievement, Suimei-kun."

"Hey, don't go standing on your tip-toes to hit my head. What do you take me for? Some sort of no-good detective?"

After wrapping up his little comedy routine with Hydemary, Suimei quickly returned to explaining the theory at hand.

"Moreover, there are pretty considerable restrictions depending on the type of law. It's likely the divinity of their world added the law of the Elements as some sort of addendum to the original laws."

"So this Elemental business is the mainstream form of magicka in their world?"

"Yup. They call it magic."

Upon hearing that, Hatsumi cocked her head to the side.

"Wait a second, Suimei. What's the difference? Between magicka and magic, I mean."

"Nuance. Magicka concerns techniques to manipulate the mysteries, while magic concerns mystical law. Well, fundamentally, they both have to do with the mysteries."

To a magician, the word "mysteries" generally encompassed all that was mystical in nature. This included, for example, the wonders and monsters of Japan. It could be used as an umbrella term for magicka, mana, and the laws of the world, et cetera—anything and everything mystical.

"In any event," Suimei sighed as he turned to Felmenia. "It's even weaker over here, huh?"

"Now that you mention it... Yes, it seems to be. It really doesn't possess its usual power."

The white flame that Felmenia had created was lacking destructive power for the mana it used. In essence, the amount of heat it emitted wasn't particularly high. Contemplating the reason for this...

It's just like what happened to me, huh?

It dawned on Suimei that this was similar to how he'd been unable to bring about his full power in the other world. Magicka utilizing the laws of this world lost its power there; and so too did magicka utilizing the laws of that world lose its power here. It was like how a radio would get staticky when moved too far away from the source of its signal. And that static, so to speak, prevented spells from manifesting at their full power.

“Okay, try the first spell I taught you next.”

“White Flame Hyacinth!”

When Felmenia unleashed her keywords this time, a magicka circle made of white manalight deployed, rotated, and expanded at her feet with white electrical currents. Shortly after, an identical magicka circle took shape in the air and a blinding beam shot into the sky.



The white light tore through the dark of night with the whistling sound of burning atmosphere. The moment it died out, the remnants of the white manalight came floating back down to earth like powdered snow. It was a truly fantastic sight.

“Oooh. It’s totally different. The last one was completely anticipated by the spell, but this time the spell properly generated the flames and is intervening with them.”

The magic of Felmenia’s world was based on the Elements. Said Elements became the medium for the magic, so no matter the spell, the effect always took a fixed form.

In the case of Felmenia’s Truth Flare, the medium was fire. So if an opponent were to take countermeasures against fire, that alone could render her spell powerless. However, if the fire she created wasn’t based on chemical elements and natural phenomena—in other words, if it employed a more conceptual fire—it couldn’t be dealt with so easily. As long as the foundation of the flames was magical, it would be impossible to dispel them unless the magicka behind them was unraveled. If one were to douse truly magical fire with water, for example, it wouldn’t show the slightest sign of weakening or dying out.

“What’s more, this spell was quite intricate and finely detailed.”

“Th-Thank you very much.”

Felmenia smiled upon receiving Hydemary’s praise. Meanwhile, Hatsumi was still staring up into the sky with her head cocked to the side.

“I can’t really tell the difference. Was that amazing?” she asked.

“Rather than amazing, it’d be better to say it was particularly well built,” Hydemary replied.

“There are a ton of people out there who would try to put something like that together in a slapdash way,” Suimei added.

The magicka users of the group understood what Suimei meant well enough, but both Hatsumi and Lefille seemed to find his commentary hard to digest.

“Suimei-kun, you once said that magicka can’t be used unless the proper procedures are followed, right? Is that what you’re talking about?” Lefille asked.

“It’s somewhat like a painting. Let’s say we have two people paint the same picture—one who pays attention to the finest details

and one who doesn't. Their paintings might look the same from far away, but when observed closely, you'd be able to see the rough work the sloppier painter did. That's the difference meticulousness makes," Suimei explained.

"If the sloppy portions of the spell aren't cleaned up, they can be taken advantage of. That's why it's better for magicka to be finely detailed down to the smallest intricacies," Hydemary added.

In keeping with the painting analogy, Hydemary essentially meant that the rougher elements of the painting diminished its value.

In the midst of this discussion, Liliana suddenly began tugging on Suimei's sleeve.

"Suimei... it actually seems like... spells from this world... have become stronger."

"Well, I mean, they utilize laws from this world, so that's only natural."

As she processed Suimei's reply, Lefille seemed to realize something.

"Wait, does that mean the same is true for your powers, Suimeikun?"

"They're probably back to normal, yeah."

Suimei was always diligent when it came to preparing his spells, so they were never lacking in craft. Even outside of battle and in times of peace, he was always fashioning them stronger and more intricate than before. He couldn't help that his magicka had manifested weaker in the other world, but simply by returning to his own, he was already back at peak power.

Very suddenly, everyone but Hydemary—who already knew the true extent of his power—was suspiciously eyeing Suimei like some kind of swindler.

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"What's with all of you?"

When he questioned them, Hatsumi stepped forth as the representative for Team "WTF, Suimei?"

"Suimei, are you even more of a monster than we thought?"

"Monster...? It's not nice to call people that, you know?"

"I'm surprised... you can say that... with that... constantly

lying... tongue of yours.”

The one to utter such poisonous words with an air of astonishment was, of course, none other than Liliana.

“I can tell you all about Suimei-kun’s true abilities if you want. But it’s too bad. I would’ve loved to have seen him lose his cool over his weakened magicka. Breaking down at every turn, screaming at the top of his lungs, stamping the ground in frustration...”

“Erk...”

Hydemary had practically pinned Suimei to a T, so there was hardly any room for him to argue with her. Especially since he was still feeling self-conscious about the temper tantrum he’d thrown at Royal Castle Camellia in Astel.

“But if you were to come to our world, Lady Hydemary, wouldn’t the same thing happen to you?”

“Me? That doesn’t apply to me.”

“Oh...? Suimei-dono, what does she mean? I thought it was inevitable that magicians from this world experienced weakened magicka once separated from it...”

“The source of Mary’s techniques is Mary herself. They work as long as she’s present. She does, however, naturally still require the necessary tools to use her magicka.”

“But I always keep all those shut away in my room.”

Hydemary’s magicka was categorized as origin magicka here in this world. It wasn’t affiliated with any specific system and was based on laws that she herself gave birth to. Precisely because of that, the mediums and phenomena required for her magicka were at her full disposal no matter where she was.

And upon hearing this, both Felmenia and Liliana looked at Hydemary in shock.

“Th-Th-That means...”

“She’s... the founder... of her own magicka?”

“Mm, that’s about the short of it.”

That was *exactly* it. Hydemary had created a new system of magicka, which wasn’t in and of itself a particularly rare feat. Wielders of origin magicka appeared once every few decades; it was more a matter of whether or not they could manage to leave anything behind before being culled. Those who were lucky enough to keep themselves and their magicka alive were celebrities in the world of magicka in this day and age.

Turning from the subject of magicka, however, Suimei realized that Hatsumi was a little restless.

“Hatsumi?”

“Yeah... I was just thinking maybe it’s about time I show my face.”

It was the amount of time she’d spent away from home that had Hatsumi on edge. Suimei’s aunt and uncle knew he was a magician, so they likely weren’t too worried about him. But Hatsumi was different. There was no way they wouldn’t be worried about their daughter, and each day that passed by without seeing her only increased that worry.

“I’ll go with you. Intruding on them with a big group like this would be a little rude, though. The rest of you can wait in my house... Mary, take care of them.”

“Very well. I also think that would be for the best.”

Once Hydemary agreed to the plan, Suimei looked to the other girls.

“I don’t think we should be moving around on our own.”

“There seems to be a mountain of curiosities all around, so there’s a great deal we still need to have explained to us.”

“Knowing the local customs... is important.”

It was only natural for the girls to be wary in a completely foreign world. If one had to be mindful of cultural differences between countries, visiting another world was the extreme version of that. Furthermore, this world abided by different physical laws than what they were used to. It went without saying that they’d need a certain amount of hand-holding while they adjusted to things.

Suimei then exchanged looks with Hydemary as she asked him a question.

“Suimei-kun, how advanced was civilization in the other world?”

“Somewhere between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. What’s more, the mysteries are close to the people, so there were areas here and there that dated even further back.”

“Wow... Aren’t they going to faint from culture shock?”

“They should be fine. I did explain what to expect beforehand.”

“I’m sure they’ll still be surprised.”

“I bet they will be.”

Suimei and Hatsumi had explained things to the girls before

teleporting, but hearing about something and actually experiencing it were two very different things. The girls would need to see the world for themselves before they truly came to understand it.

“Let’s go inside for now and give your parents a call.”

With that, the group headed to the back door of the Yakagi mansion. The traps scattered throughout the yard were all automatic, programmed not to react to the owner or any of his guests.

Suimei opened the door and instructed the three girls from another world to take off their shoes before heading into the living room. Lying atop the antique furniture there were unfamiliar dolls—and quite a number of them. On the drawers, on the table, on the sofa... They were strewn all over the place. This, of course, wasn’t a decorative choice on Suimei’s part. No, the dolls had been put in place without his consent or knowledge. But he didn’t even need to ask who the culprit was.

Suimei turned to look at the principal offender, Hydemary, with a reproachful gaze.

“Say, Mary... What did you do to my house?”

“This is what you get for being gone so long. I made all of these because I got so bored waiting for you here.”

Suimei didn’t find that a terribly good excuse for turning someone else’s home into a dollhouse in their absence.

“And it didn’t cross your mind that this was trespassing?”

“Not really. I’m your disciple, so you don’t really mind, right? Hatsumi-chan comes over uninvited all the time too, you know?”

“Well, you got me there...”

There, Suimei glanced over at the other person in question... But Hatsumi was standing in the living room in wide-eyed shock.

“That’s a lot of dolls...”

The trio from another world was similarly in awe. They were each picking up dolls and admiring their delicate handiwork.

“These are pretty impressive.”

“They’re so finely made!”

“They’re... cute.”

“Well, I’m the one who made them, and I *am* a genius,” Hydemary boasted.

“You didn’t curse them or anything, right?” Suimei replied dubiously.

“There’s no way I would do something so terrible to my little

children.”

“Yeah, right! What about *that* one?”

“*That* one? Oh, the Suimei-kun doll?” Hydemary asked as she pulled a stuffed doll out of nowhere.

It was a small creation with an adorably oversized head. The doll itself appeared to be a young man with black hair and a black suit... And that was no coincidence, for it had been modeled after a certain someone.

“Yup. Here it is: Mini Suimei-kun v.3.”

“D-Damn it! You made more of them?!”

“Uhuh.”

“That’s nothing to be fucking proud of! Get rid of that thing right the hell now!”

Suimei immediately tried to snatch the doll from Hydemary’s hands, but she skillfully twirled around to evade him. Felmenia couldn’t help perking up with curiosity at all the fuss.

“Um, what exactly is that? It must be something quite unusual for Suimei-dono to be so flustered.”

“This, you see, is a godly item capable of manipulating Suimei-kun however you’d like.”

“Oh?! Please! Do tell me more!”

“I’d really... really... like to play with it.”

“Hmm, now that sounds amusing.”

The moment they learned the true nature of the doll, the other girls swarmed Hydemary. They all probably wanted to play with the doll out of sheer curiosity, but Suimei wouldn’t stand for it.

“Stop! Stoooooop! Don’t you dare let them touch that thing! And you lot! Don’t swarm around it! Mary! Don’t you fucking touch it either!”

“Do you mind if I see it first?”

The first of the girls to step forward was Lefille, and Hydemary congenially handed over the doll.

“Here you are.”

“L-Lefi...”

“Heh heh heh...”

Lefille let out an eerie giggle... before swiftly handing the doll over to Suimei.

“Lefille-san...?”

“It’s immoral to make things like this, you know? The one being manipulated can’t resist at all.”

“Ugh, I can’t believe it...”

“Th-Thanks, Lefi.”

“I mean, this kind of thing is somewhat personal to me...”

“H-Hic... You’re my only ally, Lefi.”

Suimei was moved to tears by Lefille’s kindness. As for the others who’d gotten a little excited...

“I-I was also planning on handing it over to you, Suimei-dono!”

“R-Right. I definitely... wasn’t planning on... toying around... with you, so...”

“It’s too damn late to pretend now!”

Suimei quipped back at them before stomping over to the phone to give Hatsumi’s parents a ring. Atop a small table was a nostalgic rotary phone from the olden days... Or not. It was really just a vintage-style digital phone.

“Hey, um... It’s Suimei. I don’t really know what to say, but... I’m sorry for being out of touch for so long...”

Once Suimei was on the phone, the girls behind him began talking amongst themselves.

“That’s the object that uses technology to reproduce the technique of a long distance communication spell, right?”

“Yup, that’s right. You know about it?”

“Suimei explained it... using his ‘sell-fone’... and Hatsumi’s ‘smart-fone.’”

“We were apprised of the so-called technology available in this world. But... seeing the real thing certainly is mysterious. It emits no mana, yet Suimei-dono can speak with someone so far away...”

While the other girls talked, Hatsumi timidly walked up to Suimei on the phone.

“...Hey, are things okay?”

“Yes, I’ll put her on now... Everything’s fine. Here.”

There, Suimei handed the receiver over to Hatsumi. She looked troubled for a moment, as though words had completely left her. Her mind had gone completely blank on the spot. There were two or three words from the other side of the receiver before Hatsumi finally realized exactly what it was she needed to say.

“Hey, mom? Yeah, it’s me. Sorry for worrying you... No, I’m doing okay. Yeah, I’ll come home right away.”

After a brief exchange, Hatsumi hung up the phone and let out a big sigh like she’d just checked something major off of her to-do list

“With this, you finally get some real relief, huh?”

“We finally made it back and everything... I wonder why I still felt so guilty about it.”

That, undoubtedly, was because she was Japanese.

Leaving the visitors from another world behind with Hydemary in the Yakagi mansion, Suimei and Hatsumi headed next door to the Kuchiba residence.



In this world, there existed a class of master swordsmen known as the Sword of Swords. They were acknowledged to be very summit of all sword wielders in the world of martial arts.

The Swords were ranked from one to twelve, but each and every one of them was strong without exception. They were all so skilled in their craft that it was said the crown of the very strongest was within reach for all of them. They were the inheritors of unbelievable sword techniques, or those who had invented such techniques themselves. And when the brunt of these powers was brought to bear on the battlefield, they weren't just unbelievable... They were capable of overturning common sense at its very roots, no matter the era.

A slash to cut through metal was but the lowliest of skills to them.

A range that wasn't restricted to the length of their arms and blade.

An ability to move across land at great speed using a technique called ground contraction.

A roar of lightning that could cleave any enemy clean in two from top to bottom.

A slashing wave that rent and crushed its target with the pure will to decapitate.

An ability to control elevation using one's posture and gait while soaring through the sky.

A sword of exorcism capable of freezing an enemy using divine aura.

A soundless blade capable of traversing shadows and sniping enemies.

A phantom illusion that manifested the legends of all the world's swords.

No one, of course, knew these techniques officially. Just like magicka, such skill with a sword was so far beyond the norm that it had to be concealed from the general public.

But Suimei's very neighbor was one such swordsman: the fourth seat of the Sword of Swords from the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani school, Kuchiba Kiyoshiro, who was recognized as the strongest swordsman in Japan.

"It's nothing special. All I did was chase after my brother, and this was naturally what I achieved in the process."

Those were Kuchiba Kiyoshiro's own words. It was the answer he'd once given Suimei when he asked how Kiyoshiro had come to be so strong.

The brother Kiyoshiro spoke of was Suimei's father, Yakagi Kazamitsu—the former head of the Yakagi family, a lineage of magicians of Society pedigree, who was heralded as the best magician in the Orient. He displayed prodigious power from a young age and went around the world suppressing mystical calamities and criminals alike. Even though he walked the path of righteousness, he was one of the mystics counted among the Greed of Ten.

Chasing after such a man with nothing but a sword in hand was beyond reckless. But that was precisely how Kuchiba Kiyoshiro had staked his claim at the summit of all swordsmen.

And it was that man—master swordsman Kuchiba Kiyoshiro—who sat before Suimei right now. He was casually dressed, seated upon a floor cushion with an arm propped atop one upright knee. He was ready to spring into action at a moment's notice, like his zeal was too much to contain. It made him seem rather like a young man who still had too much energy for his own good.

But his behavior wasn't the only thing that made him seem young. He was the father of a girl in her late teens, but his looks certainly didn't betray that. At most, Kiyoshiro appeared to be in his late twenties, which really gave a sense of just how abnormal he was. To anyone who was none the wiser, he could easily pass for Hatsumi's much older brother.

Kiyoshiro, however, was actually well into his forties—just on the verge of taking his first steps into middle-age. He wasn't a young man by any stretch of the imagination. He wore a jokester's grin, but his eyes contained a dreadfulness befitting his years. His long, black hair was pulled back, clearly revealing the scar on his

face. His body was slender, but packed with muscles.

“Instructor, I see you’re just the same as always.”

“Not that I could hold a candle to my brother in that regard.”

That was the reply Suimei got upon greeting his uncle. Again, the brother Kiyoshiro referred to was Suimei’s father. Kiyoshiro had always looked up to and idolized Kazamitsu as an older brother, but it wasn’t until later in life when they both married—Suimei’s mother and Hatsumi’s mother being sisters—that they actually became brothers-in-law.

When Suimei and Hatsumi arrived at the Kuchiba residence, Hatsumi’s parents were waiting for her at the door. Her mother warmly embraced her and her father cheekily ruffled her hair. After their initial reunion, Suimei and Hatsumi then followed Hatsumi’s parents into the Japanese-style guest room where they were now sitting across from each other.

“Mmm, what a great smell.”

Hatsumi sprawled herself on the tatami with a soft expression, joyfully taking in the nostalgic scent of the room.



"It really is nice. So relaxing."

"Mhm."

"Oh, yeah. By the way, where's Haseto?"

"He's out of town right now. Didn't I mention that on the phone?"

"I believe he'll return tomorrow at the latest. He was quite worried about you, Hatsumi-san."

The supple voice that followed Kiyoshiro's belonged to Yukio, Hatsumi's mother. She both sounded and looked the part of a warrior's wife. She wore traditional Japanese clothing and had long, black hair, but uncharacteristic of Japanese aesthetics, her beautiful face was accented with red eyeliner. She had a very similar aura to Hatsumi's, though their personalities were rather different.

In response to his wife, Kiyoshiro was no longer able to conceal his mischievous side.

"I wasn't worried at all, though."

"Oh? Then remind me who it was that went running around for help because his precious only daughter suddenly disappeared."

"Hey now..."

Kiyoshiro's bravado was countered with a reserved giggle. Yukio's attitude was like a willow that warded away Kiyoshiro's mischievousness. They'd always gotten along well in that regard.

"Suimei, I got calls from your branch asking about you too, you know? Seems they investigated the entire area, but all traces of you suddenly vanished at some point. Everyone was on high alert for a couple of months."

"Aah..."

Suimei hadn't dared to ask Hydemary about it, but he'd more or less assumed that was the case. With one of HQ's executive candidates caught up in some sort of incident, it wasn't unreasonable to assume that the rest of the branch might be targeted too. Every Society magician in Japan had likely slept with one eye open until it was confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was no lingering threat.

But it was on the subject of Suimei that the loose and relaxed expression Kiyoshiro had taken on while chatting with his wife suddenly turned serious.

"Well, before we continue... This means Hatsumi's found out,

no?”

“Yeah. Like so,” Suimei said as he spread out his arm, pantomiming donning his suit.

Seeing that gesture, Kiyoshiro let out a resigned sigh.

“I see. Well, I did think it was about time to tell her... so I guess this sort of works out? I still feel kinda iffy about it, though.”

“Isn’t it a little mean to have kept it a secret from me all this time?”

Hatsumi, unlike her playful father, was clearly in a bad mood. The people she trusted most had intentionally hidden the fact that Suimei was a magician from her for years. She had every reason to be upset with her parents for keeping such a secret. She puffed out her soft-looking cheeks and threw a sulky look Kiyoshiro and Yukio’s way.

It was childish of Hatsumi to act like this, but now that she was back home, she was nothing more than a child in front of her parents. Kiyoshiro looked at his daughter’s adorable pouting face and strained a smile.

“Don’t be like that,” he said before turning back to Suimei. “So? What kinda nuisance did you get caught in this time?”

“About that... It’s a kinda crazy story, but...”

With that preamble, Suimei went on to explain what happened in the other world to Kiyoshiro and Yukio. About how he was summoned, how he’d fought monsters, and how he was reunited with Hatsumi. Hatsumi’s parents, naturally enough, furrowed their brows as they listened to all this.

“...This is awfully difficult to believe,” Kiyoshiro said incredulously.

“Everything Suimei said is true,” Hatsumi immediately interjected.

“Well, this is Suimei-san. In a sense, I do believe that anything is possible.”

“I’m surprised you can accept it so easily, Yuki.”

“Is it really that surprising? This is hardly anything compared to Kazamitsu-san, no? Come now. Remember that one time? Back when we saw him go upstream in time?”

“Aaah, yeah... That did happen, didn’t it?”

“...”

“...”

Kiyoshiro and Yukio began talking about some of the

mysterious happenings they'd experienced after getting involved with Kazamitsu—and they ultimately came to the conclusion that Suimei's antics didn't hold a candle to his father's. Suimei and Hatsumi were both at an astonished loss for words. Just what kind of ridiculous things had their parents been through that being summoned to another world didn't seem like all that big a deal?

Suimei and Hatsumi looked at each other. They were now the ones with furrowed brows, reversing the earlier situation with Hatsumi's parents.

"Good grief. My brother generally ignored all common sense, but I guess you're perpetrating some pretty crazy stuff too."

"No, I mean, this wasn't my fault. I didn't perpetrate anything."

Resenting being mislabeled as the responsible party, Suimei rose to his feet and objected, but Kiyoshiro and Yukio merely exchanged knowing looks.

"But you know..." Kiyoshiro muttered.

"Right?" Yukio giggled.

"Y-You too, Yukio-san...?" Suimei despaired.

"This is your own fault, you know, Suimei? You always jump headlong into any trouble that comes your way," Hatsumi retorted.

"Ugh..."

Suimei couldn't argue there. That was indeed often how things turned out whenever he was forced to stick his nose into them. But this time, really and truly, Suimei was a victim. He was summoned to another world completely against his will. Moreover, since he'd actually figured out a way to get home, a little praise wouldn't have been unjustified.

"Regardless, Hatsumi also got caught up in the summoning. It would've been a huge problem for us if you weren't there with her. Thank you."

"It was nothing..."

As though he'd read Suimei's mind, Kiyoshiro corrected his posture and bowed his head. Suimei was a little embarrassed to have his own uncle thank him so earnestly and formally, but Kiyoshiro soon raised his head with a skeptic grin on his face.

"...You're really not lying, right?"

"Do you think I'd lie to you with such a straight face?"

"Well, fair. But your story really is quite out there."

Anyone would be suspect of a story about traveling to another world and back, but what could Suimei do to make someone believe

him? Or, at the least, make it easier for someone to believe him? This was no different than trying to tell Kiyoshiro he'd been spirited away. Was there even a reasonable comparison that would work as an analogue?

In that regard, Suimei had one advantage. Kiyoshiro had worked with Kazamitsu, a talented magician, so he wasn't completely oblivious to the ways of magicka.

"You know how some people say there are worlds on the other side of the astral plane? It's a little offbeat, but it isn't entirely impossible. I think it's within the realm of reason for there to be other livable worlds among all those extreme cases like Mars, Venus, Hell, and other such planes."

"Hmm... Well, when you put it like that..."

Suimei managed to frame things in a somewhat more understandable fashion. Kiyoshiro was still grimacing, but it seemed the only way to convince him past this would be to take him to the other world personally.

After groaning for a bit, Kiyoshiro suddenly changed the topic.

"By the way, was it just the two of you who came back?"

"My other friends who were summoned said they'd stay behind, so they're still there. Aside from that, we brought back three others with us."

For some reason, upon hearing Suimei's answer, Kiyoshiro flashed a somewhat filthy grin his way.

"Say..."

"Yes?"

"These 'others' you brought back... They're all girls, right?"

Hearing Kiyoshiro's question, Yukio elegantly lifted her hand to her mouth as she giggled. Suimei, meanwhile, was completely baffled.

"How did you know that?"

"Well, you *are* my brother's son. This is no surprise."

"That doesn't explain anything, though..."

"But of course. What else would we expect of Kazamitsu-san's son?"

It seemed there was no deterring Hatsumi's parents. Suimei looked to his side for sympathy, but Hatsumi returned his pleading look with a reproachful gaze.

Just what were they basing all this on? Suimei couldn't help but wonder nervously.

After that, Suimei discussed bringing Lefille to the dojo the following day with Kiyoshiro before finally returning home to the Yakagi estate and his guests from another world.



“Now... I wonder what those three are up to.”

Suimei was presently walking back alone, looking up at the stars and muttering to himself. After escorting Hatsumi home and explaining things to her parents, one of his primary concerns was now resolved and a sense of relief spread through his chest.

There were still plenty of other places he had to go, and plenty more explaining he had to do while keeping everything consistent. Depending on the person he was explaining things to, he might even have to use magicka to forcefully alleviate their anxieties. But things had turned out fine in Hatsumi's case, which lightened the load on Suimei's shoulders considerably.

As such, he began humming and arrived home with a skip in his step. He opened the door and headed to the living room, where he found Liliana glued to the television.

“Penguin...”

Her usually calm voice was unable to hide her excitement as she stared into the bright screen, her lone eye sparkling. It seemed a program about animals was on. Lately there had been a lot of animal-centric shows airing in the primetime slot, so the girls had likely come across it while flipping through the channels.

“Seal...”

It turned out that the show wasn't an animal special per se, but a documentary on the differences between the North and South Poles. As part of the larger picture, they were showcasing the animals that inhabited each region.

“Polar bear...”

Each was a species Liliana had never seen in her world. It was entirely possible they similarly existed at the extreme poles of the planet there, but they certainly weren't anything someone would come across during the course of their everyday life.

The program on television eventually shifted from animals to something else, but Liliana didn't show any sort of lingering regret over this.

“So white... and fluffy... Oh-so fluffy.”

She moved her hands in the air like she was imagining petting the penguins and seals. Rather than saying she was merely intoxicated, it would be more accurate to say that she was dead drunk on cuteness. She had been exposed to too much of it all at once, and it had blown the circuits in her brain. Liliana kept muttering “fluffy this” and “fluffy that” to herself before letting out a deflating sigh and falling back on the sofa in agony.

Meanwhile, Felmenia and Lefille were both still watching the screen and discussing the documentary.

“Hmm... Everything there is completely frozen in ice. This manner of scenery didn’t exist even in Noshias.”

“W-Wha— That block of frozen land is crumbling away! And on such a massive scale...”

“It’s quite majestic, isn’t it?”

“Indeed...”

As he listened in on their conversation, Suimei called out to Hydemary, who was repositioning her dolls.

“Hey, did they ask about the tiny people in the box?”

“That’s just too cliché, Suimei-kun. There’s no way anybody would actually say something like that.”

That’s what Suimei had thought too, but it was such a staple joke that he kind of wanted to hear someone say it. However, the intelligent girls he’d brought to this world didn’t have such primitive imaginations.

“Even we know that this is some sort of device capable of projecting images from far away. It is, however, rather surprising that these images can be recorded and projected so vividly.”

“Telephones, air conditioning, and lighting that doesn’t require mana. At a glance, there are so many other strange devices here that I can’t even begin to guess what they’re used for... You did warn us about this beforehand, Suimei-kun, but I didn’t think it would be to this extent.”

“Indeed. This world is incredible.”

Lefille and Felmenia groaned with an expression of both wonder and awe.

“You’re really going to get your mind blown if this is all it takes to surprise you. There’s way more outrageous stuff out there than all of this.”

“...”

“...”

The girls had yet to see cars and trains, for example. They were common enough sights in modern Japan—the general populace used them on the regular. The same was true of television, but considering the compounding technological marvels the girls would be faced with going out into the city... They were in for the shock of their lives.

“Where’s Lady Hatsumi?”

“Aah, she’ll be spending some quality time with her parents today. It’s been a while since she’s been home and all.”

“I see. That’s good.”

The functional older sister of the group gave a satisfied nod. Lefille had lost her own family, so she understood full well the significance of Hatsumi’s reunion with hers. She was happy for her.

Suimei glanced over at the sofa, where Liliana was still rolling about in a ball in her own little world.

“Liliana? Hellooooo?”

When Suimei called out to her, she shot upright with a beaming smile.

“The fluff, Suimei! So much fluff!”

“R-Right...”

“Will I... be able... to see them again?”

“Hmm, if we could record it, then yeah... But I’m bound to screw that up.”

“I’m a genius, but homunculi are mystical in nature, so I won’t be any help either. The appliances in Suimei-kun’s house are magically treated so I can just barely manage here, but... What about the internet, Suimei-kun?”

“Not happening. The moment I touch a computer, the screen goes blue.”

Whenever Suimei touched any sort of advanced electronic, it would immediately start misbehaving. You see, those whose bodies are steeped in the mysteries have something of an adverse effect on scientific laws.

Simple appliances posed no issue. But as devices grew more complex—like computers—they would break down on the spot. Suimei had personally destroyed many a computer at school in this fashion. He was at the point where even touching the power button was out of the question. He was effectively traumatized.

In any case, upon hearing that she wouldn’t be able to see more cute animals, Liliana hung her head low in disappointment.

“I... see...”

“Don’t be like that. If you really want to see them, we can ask Hatsumi to get on a computer and show you some.”

“You mean I can... see the fluffies again?!”

Liliana triumphantly thrust both her arms in the air. Seeing her innocent behavior, however, suddenly reminded Suimei of something else entirely. Speaking of fluffies, he had some fluffy business to tend to himself.

“...Oops, crap. I almost completely forgot.”

Suimei flew over to the veranda in a fluster and threw open the glass door. This wasn’t, mind you, because he needed some fresh air. He pulled a small bell out of nowhere and lightly jangled it outside, letting its delicate chime echo into the night. Lefille watched him do this with a curious look, her head quizzically cocked to the side.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“It’s the bunny courier, right?” Hydemary asked in turn.

“Yeah. I wrote a bunch of letters before coming back, so I figure I ought to send them all out,” Suimei replied.

There were many magicians who despised the conveniences of modern civilization and strictly refrained from using them. And it wasn’t just magicians who refused to have landlines installed in their homes; there were even magicians who sequestered themselves in the mountains as far away from civilization as possible. To accommodate them, there existed a group of specialists in communication known as couriers. After ringing the designated summoning bell, a courier would appear and deliver mail to any recipient regardless of location... That is, of course, except in another world.

Before long, jingling chimes like Santa’s sleigh bells could be heard drawing nearer. When the jingling came to a halt, the thicket in the garden outside began rustling and trembling as though a small animal was hiding within.

“Huh?”

“That’s...”

The first to show surprise at this turn of events were Felmenia and Liliana. They were likely bewildered at the sudden appearance of something without sensing any magicka at play.

Eventually, a lone girl hopped out of the thicket like a hare. She wore baggy red trousers with suspenders and a white shirt. She

carried a red, jam-packed bag slung across her body that was the very picture of a mailbag. She also donned a red hat with adorable fake rabbit ears poking out of it.

She was only a little taller than Liliana, and by all appearances, she was a healthy-looking Asian girl. She had a short wand hanging at her waist with several small, green pom-poms dangling from it. After coming up to the veranda, she politely bowed to Suimei.

“Hey there. Sorry for being out of touch,” he said.

At that, the courier puffed out her soft cheeks and began adorably berating him.

“Long time no see, Suimei-san! Where exactly have you been all this time?! I’ve got heaps on loads on mountains of letters addressed to you, you know?!”

“Sorry, my bad. I just got caught up in something a little weird.”

Upon hearing his excuse, the courier...

“Oooh!”

“Now listen here: I said I got *caught up* in something, not that I *caused* it.”

The girl seemed to guess what had happened, and Suimei narrowed his eyes at her. The girl, however, paid him no mind and let out a heavy sigh.

“I mean, it’s just more of the usual, right?”

“Mm. Just the usual,” Hydemary added.

“Thanks for... your hard work.”

Liliana’s thanks were obviously not directed at Suimei, and she clearly wasn’t alone in the sentiment. Everyone else was nodding in agreement.

“Why are you all ganging up on me?”

“I mean, come on.”

“Because you’re you... Suimei.”

Neither Hydemary nor Liliana showed any mercy.

Ignoring them for now, Suimei handed his outgoing letters over to the courier. As he did, the courier prepared to hand him his incoming mail. She recited a chant and letters came pouring out of her red bag with enough force that it was reminiscent of a certain cat-shaped robot’s special pocket in action.

“Ugh, that’s a lot.”

“It’s half a year’s worth... Well, sort of. There were just a bunch of people who thought they should at least write when you

suddenly vanished. Speaking of, where *have* you been all this time, Suimei-san?”

“Er, well, you know...”

“Actually, these girls are all dressed pretty strange... Is this what you're into, maybe?”

“No! God... Hey, there's even an enforcement request in here?”

“Oh, that's a case that was designated for you. It seems the others weren't able to handle it, so I was asked to turn it over to you.”

“When was this?”

“Hmm... About two months ago?”

“Is that really alright?”

“I guess they're not in a rush?”

“Meaning it's a case that can't cause the Thousand Nights Association much harm...”

“Yup.”

The Thousand Nights Association was the body that oversaw the world's magicka organizations. Their supervision was to ensure that the mysteries remained out of the public eye, but the Association also doubled as a mediator between other organizations.

Enforcement requests were sent to deal with things like magickal crimes perpetrated by magicians, beasts of the apocalypse outbreaks, and localized mystical phenomena or calamities. They were all important jobs where an individual organization couldn't handle them alone.

But apparently, this request wasn't terribly time-sensitive. That meant it didn't have a direct impact on the Thousand Nights Association, or perhaps that the risk of the mysteries being exposed was exceedingly low.

The fact that the Association had sent a request to an Enforcer whose whereabouts were completely unknown likely meant that, even in the worst case, whatever threat needed to be tended to wasn't urgent. It would probably even be fine left at large... meaning there was fundamentally no way it was something that only Suimei could handle.

Suimei opened the expensive-looking little box and pulled out a black envelope sealed with rose red wax. He used counter magicka to undo the high-level spell that kept it shut and pulled out the enclosed letter. It was a request for the arrest, sealing, or

elimination of a particular magician.

“Suimei-kun, what’s that?” Lefille asked.

“Oh, it’s a job that’s been entrusted to me. There’s something like a council that oversees all of the magicka organizations, and once they confirm there’s a criminal that needs to be dealt with, they send out requests like this.”

Hearing this, Felmenia cocked her head to the side.

“Can’t the council go catch the criminals themselves? Certainly that should be possible without passing the job on to another party so long as they made the appropriate preparations...”

Lefille and Liliana looked to Suimei as though they shared the same question.

“Of course there are jobs they handle themselves sometimes. But seeing as they’re fundamentally a supervisory organization, they aren’t a particularly large group. They don’t have enough people as it is, so it’s difficult for them to train up their own personnel or scout other organizations for the right person for the job.”

“So you mean to say there aren’t all that many magicians with the appropriate skill set?”

“That’s the short of it.”

Having “the appropriate skill set” was a rather tall order. A magician’s abilities were deeply entwined with both their inherent talent and the effort they’d put into their craft, and an Enforcer wasn’t something someone could simply become with enough training. Finding a sprout with the right aptitudes was like hitting the jackpot. As for already-trained magicians, scouting people from other organizations required the consent of both the magician in question and the organization they belonged to. That left the Association little choice but to rely on others for help, as they did now with Suimei.

The Magicka Bureau of the Thousand Nights Association hereby issues the following job to the Society’s eighth seat, Enforcer Yakagi Suimei.

The target is ———. It has only been a short time since they made their way into the world, but take heed that their skills are grand class. The threat level of this request has been escalated from B to A accordingly. The target is to be taken dead or alive.

Bear in mind the target’s specialties are barrier and restraint

magicka. Items relevant to the case are enclosed within. We hope that you make good use of them.

Additional details regarding the target can be found below...

Suimei scanned the contents of the request and began mumbling to himself.

“Threat level A, dead or alive... They’re not kidding around here. This is really something.”

The one to show further interest in the matter was Hydemary, who was personally quite familiar with enforcement requests.

“You don’t say?”

“Huh? Yeah...”

“What’s the matter? You don’t seem quite yourself.”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Hydemary innocently drew closer, and Suimei looked a bit uneasy as he swiftly turned his attention back to the box.

“They included... Wait, what?!”

Inside the box was a transparent baggy that contained what looked like several blue pills.

“There’re drugs involved this time?! Just how lax is the Thousand Nights Association being by not treating this as a god damn emergency?!”

If drugs were involved, there was an inherent danger that the threat could spread among junkies... meaning the ones to suffer would be normal people who had nothing to do with magicka. Magicians could take whatever they pleased—they had magickal ways of dealing with side effects and even addiction. But normal people weren’t so lucky, which was precisely why mystical crimes involving drugs were typically considered extremely dangerous.

Hydemary tilted her head to the side, her black hair swishing behind her.

“Does that mean there’s no danger of this one spreading to the public?”

“Maybe it’s not addictive.”

“Or maybe it’s the kind of drug that kills you outright.”

Anyone taking magickal drugs without the proper resistance would be left crippled at best, and the withdrawal symptoms could be—quite literally—killer. Hydemary was brimming with curiosity about the pills and leaned in to take a closer look.

“Can I taste one?”

“Don’t go putting things in your mouth just ’cause they look like candy.”

“No? I think we’d be able to learn quite a bit if I gave it a lick.”

“Even so, the answer’s still no.”

“Suimei-kun... you’re unexpectedly overprotective.”

“There’s nothing unexpected or overprotective about it, damn it! Seriously...”

Even if Hydemary was a homunculus and therefore not exactly human, there was no guarantee the drugs would have no effect on her—which was precisely why Suimei wasn’t going to let her taste anything.

“I think it’d be fine, though... Have you seen this before?”

Hydemary turned to the courier and asked.

“Nope.”

“Is the Holy Inquisition on the move?”

“I don’t think so. This is completely within the Thousand Nights Association’s court.”

The courier’s rabbit ears twitched as she replied, and she soon found Liliana drawing closer.

“Ears...”

“Huh?”

“Your ears... moved.”

She was looking at the courier’s outfit with the same twinkle in her eye she’d had when she was watching the animals on television. The heavy atmosphere lingering from the serious conversation before was completely blown away by her delighted tone.

“Can I... touch your ears?”

“Huh? Oh, sure. But just a little.”

The courier bent over to make it easier for Liliana to reach her fake rabbit ears.

“Want to become a courier too? If you act now, we can throw in the bunny ears as a bonus, you know?”

“I’m... a little interested...”

“Hey, don’t recruit my disciple!”

“Your disciple...? Oh! So the rumor that you only take on cute girls as disciples really is true, huh, Suimei-san?”

“Like hell it is! It’s just a coincidence! A coincidence, I tell you!”

“I’m kidding. I was just joking around.”

The courier giggled, and Suimei let out an exhausted sigh.

“You’ll sigh away all your happiness like that, you know,

Suimei-san?”

“If you could really sigh away happiness, I’d be long dead from misery by now... Anyways, take care of those letters for me. You’re okay with Japanese yen for the tip, right?”

“Yup.”

“Here’s your fee, plus a little extra for the trouble.”

The courier held out both hands like a child demanding their allowance, and Suimei handed over a generous stack of bills. He couldn’t afford to be stingy here. That wasn’t to say a tight wallet would mean his letters would get lost or anything, however; couriers were not such a fickle lot. It was simply a matter of stressing trust in a working relationship.

“I’m leaving those letters to you.”

“I’ll be sure to deliver them.”

The courier took a grandiose bow, and after hopping over the fence in one bound, she vanished upon touching the ground.

Chapter 2: Into the Modern World

Suimei felt unusually pleasant upon waking the following morning. After laying his head on a familiar pillow, he'd sunk right into his bed. The relief of finally being home and the comfort of his own bed made for a far nicer night's sleep than normal. He woke up completely refreshed and free of aches and pains. He was wide awake now, but saw no harm in taking his time getting up.

"It should be fine if I just laze around a little longer..."

As he lazily mumbled to himself, Suimei took a look around the room that was unmistakably his. There were stacks of grimoires atop the desk alongside several magickal tools for simple experiments. Everything was exactly how he'd left it before going to the other world.

As he stretched before getting out of bed, he noticed a strange sensation at his waist.

"Zzz..."

He could hear a light, adorable snore from beneath his sheets. Upon unraveling them, he found Liliana all snuggled up in her cat-eared pajamas. When had she crawled in there? She looked just like a cat curled up this way, and perhaps because of her posture, there was even a curved wrinkle in the sheets.



Suimei was taken aback at the intruder for a brief moment, but Liliana also crawled into his bed while half asleep back in the other world from time to time, so he wasn't particularly surprised to see her here now.

"...Where'd she even find these pajamas, anyways?"

Suimei pinched the cat ears on the pajama hood while cocking his head. The previous evening, he'd asked Hydemary to procure girl's pajamas for everyone. She'd gotten a normal set for Felmenia and Lefille, but Liliana's had ears on it for some reason.

When Suimei asked her about it, she'd coyly claimed it was a secret. But while the source of the pajamas was a mystery, Liliana was naturally delighted with them. She'd even asked Hydemary if she could take them back to the other world with her when she left, and she burst into joy upon getting permission.

In any event, just as Suimei was gently peeling Liliana off of him...

"Suimei-kun, are you awake?"

He could hear Hydemary's voice outside his door.

"Yeah. I'm up."

"I'm coming in, then."

"Hey, hang— Well, whatever."

It was just like Hydemary not to wait for an answer. She was always moving at her own pace. It rather highlighted her childish nature, as she still didn't understand why she should show any reluctance over entering a boy's room.

At this rate, Hydemary was going to see exactly the situation Suimei was in, but he confidently decided it wasn't a big deal since he hadn't done anything wrong. He simply sat in bed as the antique door clicked and the latch-type handle moved. When the door opened, the smell of rosewood drifted into the room. This apparently prompted Liliana to wake up.

"Fwaaah..."

She stayed in bed and rubbed her eyes before stretching her back.

"Is it... morning?"

And so, Hydemary got an eyeful of the scene: Suimei and Liliana sharing a bed. Her expression naturally remained stoic, but her voice was scathing.

"You know, Suimei-kun, no matter how you look at it, isn't this a little..."

"It seemed like... Felmenia and Lefille... wouldn't get to sleep... any time soon... last night..."

"So? You had no other choice but to crawl into my bed?"

"I-It wasn't really that I had no choice!"

"Yeah? That so?"

Despite his bafflement at her sudden fluster, Suimei gently stroked Liliana's head. As he did, she quieted down with a comfortable look. She was clearly drowsy, her tranquil expression not unlike a cat's.

Suspicion lingered in Hydemary's eyes. Really, it seemed like she'd gotten even more suspicious for some reason.

"So this is what you're really like, huh, Suimei-kun? It's truly embarrassing."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you're a horrible womanizer."

"I'm in... complete... agreement... fwaaah..."

"Isn't that kinda harsh?"

"But... true."

With that, Liliana clung to Suimei once more. She was still quite sleepy, it seemed. After rubbing her cheek against him, she fell right back into a slumber. As she did, Hydemary turned back to Suimei with her expressionless face.

"Hey, Suimei-kun."

"What?"

"Did you save her too?"

"Well, yeah. I'm surprised you can tell."

"Of course I can. She's so attached to you. That's the only thing it could be."

Suimei had spent quite some time with Hydemary ever since she became his disciple. Thanks to that, she had a pretty good idea of how Suimei had handled himself over in the other world.

"In short, it was business as usual for you even in another world."

"I'm still me. I only did what I wanted to do."

Suimei replied noncommittally, but he said nothing to refute Hydemary's claim. He then knit his brows upon receiving no reply, finding it strange that she sank into silence without speaking her mind.

“What’s up?”

“...Nothing really.”

“Sure doesn’t feel like it.”

“It said it was nothing.”

Hydemary huffed as she turned away. Suimei couldn’t tell what was wrong with her, but it certainly seemed like something was on her mind. As he wondered what it might be, he laid Liliana down on the bed.

After forcing Hydemary out of his room, Suimei changed into his everyday clothes and headed out into the hallway, where a certain puppy came running up to him out of nowhere.

“Suimei-dono, Suimei-dono! Please give me a detailed explanation of this grimoire!”

Said puppy was, of course, Felmenia. It was no small miracle that she’d safely made it over to him with such a massive stack of books in her arms.

“Suimei-dono! Suimei-dono!”

Glancing at her face, she was practically bursting at the seams. It was like she was running on pure excitement.

“Hey, uh, morning. First thing’s first, calm down.”

“Oh... Yes. How rude of me.”

Felmenia hung her head in embarrassment and turned red up to her cheeks.

“Now, which grimoire are you talking about?”

“This one... and this one and this one. Oh, and this one too!”

Despite saying “this grimoire” earlier, Felmenia was pointing to a ton of different books in her arms. She ended up identifying every single tome she was carrying. Impressed that she’d had the time to read through so many books, Suimei took another look at her face.

“You know you’ve got bags under your eyes, don’t you, Menia?”

“Huh? Oh, this is, um... Yeah.”

“Didn’t I tell you to avoid staying up all night?”

“Teehee...”

Felmenia tried to laugh it off even as she stood there awkwardly. Despite the sparkle in her eyes, she was looking rather pale. Taking an even closer look at her, her prided silver hair was still uncombed and somewhat disheveled.

After dinner the previous night, Suimei had given his three visitors a tour of the house and shown them his father’s study. Seeing it had seemingly stimulated Felmenia’s voracious thirst for

knowledge. She'd been on a bender ever since.

Suimei proceeded to take Felmenia to a guest room and turn down the bed for her, but she was acting remarkably strange. It was plainly evident that she was far more interested in more research than getting any sleep. The flames of her academic soul had been fanned, and she stood there restlessly fidgeting in a rather adorable fashion.

"Oh, come on..."

"Forgive me, but that room is a treasure vault! Have you not also spent at least one or two sleepless nights in there yourself, Suimei-dono?!"

"Er..."

"See?! I knew you had! You've stayed up all night too, haven't you? Haven't you?!"

Felmenia's starry eyes were glittering with excitement upon having found a kindred spirit, and she approached him eagerly.

"O-Okay, okay. I get it, alright? Jot down everything you want to know and I'll take some time to go over it with you later."

"Can't you do it right now?!"

"If we start now, we won't be done before the afternoon, you know? There's Hydemary and Liliana to think about, too."

"Ah..."

In all likelihood, if Suimei and Felmenia started discussing magickal matters now, Hydemary and Liliana would both want to join them. And Suimei wasn't interested in repeating himself over and over. It would just get out of hand. Their forum would easily run through mealtimes, and poor Lefille—the lone nonmagickal compatriot of their group—would be left all alone on the sofa until late that night.

Thinking of it that way, Suimei thought it best to set up a proper meeting.

"Where is Lefi, by the way?"

"Lefille is... When I went to take a look in the bedroom, she wasn't there."

"...And when was that?"

"Th-This morning... I think?"

Felmenia's eyes darted around the room. Her behavior and her memory were equally fuzzy. But Felmenia aside, Lefille had apparently also been up all night for some reason. It seemed she was also restless on her very first evening in another world.

“Lefille-san is awake,” Hydemary suddenly chimed in.

“That so?”

“I brewed her some tea before I came to get you.”

“Oh, I would also like some. I’m quite interested in the tea of this world.”

“Then come with me. I’ll make some for you.”

Hydemary, Felmenia, and Suimei then headed towards the living room with light steps, where they found Lefille daintily enjoying her morning tea on the sofa. Unlike Felmenia, her red hair was beautifully put up in a ponytail, and she was wearing her everyday clothing. She sat perfectly upright, and the elegant way she lifted the teacup to her lips was as pretty as a painting.

“Morning.”

“Oh, good morning, Suimei-kun. Good morning, Lady Felmenia.”

“Good morning to you too.”

“From the looks of it, you really did stay up all night, didn’t you?”

“Teehee...”

Lefille wore a smug smile like she’d predicted this outcome, and Felmenia repeated her awkward laugh from before. She then took a seat next to Lefille, who gazed out toward the veranda with a somewhat disappointed look.

“You can’t really see the stars here, huh?”

Just as she said, the number of visible stars in the modern world was quite scant compared to what she was used to—perhaps a testament to the preposterous amount of pollution in the atmosphere here.

“Have you been outside all this time, Lefi?”

“Yeah. I wanted to get a feel for what this world is really like.”

“And your impressions?”

“How to put it...? It’s like the balance is poor. The energy that I could feel everywhere at home feels very weak here.”

The energy she could feel everywhere... The nuance of her wording was quite vague, but it was indeed difficult to describe mystical energies. Science was rampant in this world; it was like its natural energies had been driven away. That had an effect on the mysteries here, and was likely the source of Lefille’s unease.

“How is the tea I brewed for you, by the way?” Hydemary asked.

“Oh, it’s wonderful. It’s something rather exquisite, isn’t it?” Lefille asked in turn.

“Of course it is. I *am* a genius, and I personally picked out the tea myself,” Hydemary replied.

Hydemary was currently standing at the island in the kitchen, preparing tea for Felmenia. Suimei was also in the kitchen, headed for the dripper at the end of the table.

“Coffee for you, Suimei-kun? Want me to make it?”

“I’ll brew it myself. I’m the barista in this house, after all.”

Suimei had long been in charge of coffee in the Yakagi mansion. It was an everyday ritual for him to brew some for his father whenever he came home from school.

Kazamitsu would always say something like that it was a father’s privilege to have his son make coffee for him, and he had Suimei do it at least once a day. Just how long had it taken for Suimei to be able to brew something to his father’s satisfaction? Given the right beans, he could now make coffee on par with any cafe.

Back in the day, Suimei always took his coffee with milk and sugar. But he stopped doing that the day he became a full-fledged magician. It was a sort of farewell to his younger self who could’ve vomited at the bitterness. It was, in a strange way, a curse.

Suimei placed a filter in the dripper with some ground beans that had been preserved with magicka. He then heated some water to just between 80 and 90 degrees Celsius before slowly pouring it around the edge of the dripper. It was a technique to enhance the taste of the coffee—something he made sure to do ever since he’d screwed it up the first time and hated the coffee it produced.

Suimei’s eyes gradually grew clearer upon smelling his first cup of coffee in over half a year. The aroma wafted into the living room as well, where Felmenia took notice of it.

“That’s a wonderful smell,” she commented.

“Right? Nothing beats coffee first thing in the morning.” Suimei replied.

“Coffee...?”

“It’s like tea made from ground beans.”

“So it’s a relative of tea? It’s... awfully dark, isn’t it?”

“It sure is.”

Coffee was called “bean tea” in Japan long ago, so saying they were related was a concise enough explanation. If Suimei really

started getting into the nitty-gritty of coffee, they'd be here all day. Felmenia and Lefille, however, both watched what Suimei was doing with great interest.

"What Suimei-kun's making there is rather bitter and acidic, so you probably shouldn't try it that way. If you really want to try some, you'll need to start with different beans and add plenty of milk and sugar," Hydemary explained.

"Isn't that just your personal preference?" Suimei interjected.

"And aren't you just overreaching? Only old men drink that stuff."

"I guess that makes me an old man."

"Wow, talk about a midlife crisis."

"Don't call it a midlife crisis. Seriously."

The two of them continued to badger each other a while longer, but when Hydemary started to calm down...

"Mary, I've got another request for you," said Suimei.

"What is it this time?"

"Sorry to ask after the pajamas last night, but could you get some innocuous clothes for the three of them?"

"Aah, right. We need to take care of that."

Lefille raised an eyebrow upon hearing this.

"Can I not walk around outside in these clothes?" she asked.

"It's not that you *can't*," Suimei replied.

"You mean to say we'll stand out, right?" Felmenia chimed in.

"Yeah, exactly." Suimei replied. "Liliana... could manage. But as for you two, your clothes pretty much scream 'otherworldly.' I think something simple like jeans or a dress will do fine. If you want to put some real effort into being fashionable, though, we can set aside a day for shopping."

Liliana's typical dress could pass for gothic lolita fashion, which wasn't unfamiliar in Japan. But Lefille's outfit was borderline, and Felmenia's was in outright cosplay territory. If they wanted to go out, they'd need street clothes.

"I can take care of that," agreed Hydemary. "They certainly do stand out as is."

"...So do you."

"I'm properly glamourous, so it's fine."

It wasn't like Hydemary never changed clothes, but she rather liked her magician's outfit. She even wore it outside all the time, so she was constantly using glamour magic to change her appearance.

She would hardly wear anything else.

But now that everyone had come to an agreement about clothes, it was time for the day's main event.

"Lefi, let's head next door when we're done here."

"Oh...? Oh!"

Suimei mimicked swinging a sword in the air, causing Lefille to exclaim in an excited voice. She'd stayed up all night just like Felmenia, but it seemed she was full of energy now. There was a fire blazing in her eyes that left no trace of her earlier disappointment over not being able to see the stars.



Suimei had a great deal he hoped to accomplish now that he was back in modern Japan, and taking Lefille to the Kuchiba residence was an absolute must on that list. She was currently burdened with multiple worries, including the fact that her archenemy manipulated her greatest weakness and that she recently felt like she was losing touch with her sword. Suimei thought he knew someone who could help her with all of that, which was precisely why he wanted to introduce her to Kiyoshiro.

Kuchiba Kiyoshiro possessed completely inhuman skill, though he himself still vaguely remained in the realm of humanity. He stood at the loftiest summit of swordsmanship. Surely he would be able to identify the core of Lefille's problems and suggest what she had to do to resolve them.

That's why Suimei was once more making the trip to the Japanese-style house next door. Lefille was walking next to him, trembling ever so slightly. It seemed she was quite excited to meet the father and teacher of Hatsumi, a swordswoman whose skills Lefille had seen firsthand. She couldn't help being a little worked up.

Lefille was currently wearing the clothes that Hydemary had procured for her. Aside from her otherworldly beauty, she now looked like a rather normal girl. She was dressed in a somewhat boyish ensemble of a T-shirt and jeans, though Suimei had recommended she wear something easier to move in for their trip to the dojo.



“This is plenty easy to move around in,” she remarked. “The clothing of this world truly is splendid.”

Suimei was glad to hear it. Thinking back on it, Felmenia was also pleased with the quality of the dress Hydemary had gotten for her.

“You called it synthetic fibers, right? Does none of the clothing in this world prickle?” Lefille asked.

“None of it that refrains from using inferior materials like they do back in your world, at least,” Suimei replied.

“Now that’s something else... I have to say, now that I know such a thing exists, I don’t think I can go back to the old stuff anymore. Heehee.”

“I don’t blame you.”

The two of them continued to joke around as they walked, eventually reaching the gate to the Kuchiba residence. Lefille looked up at it and, having thought something or other, looked back towards the Yakagi mansion.

“This has a fairly different look to it from your house, doesn’t it?”

“Mine was influenced by the architecture of the houses magicians use overseas. That’s why it’s a bit different. Houses in general here tend to look more like the ones you can see in the area. Hatsumi’s house is of a more traditional style for this country.”

“It has quite a calming atmosphere to it.”

“Yeah, Japanese houses are great.”

Suimei nodded emphatically. Despite being born and raised in a Western-style estate himself, his soul was perfectly at peace in a Japanese-style room. He couldn’t chalk it up to anything but his DNA.

With such thoughts passing through his mind, he boldly opened the front door of the Kuchiba residence and entered unannounced. Lefille was rather taken aback at the seemingly rude gesture and stared at Suimei in disbelief.

“Is it okay to just walk in like that?”

“Well, this place is kinda like a second home to me... Hang on. Yukio-saaan! Are you theeere? You are, riiight?”

Suimei called out in a slow and silly voice, and before long,

Hatsumi's mother appeared at the entrance. She was dressed in her typical traditional Japanese clothing, and the sound of her house slippers pattering across the floor heralded her arrival.

"Welcome, Suimei-san. This must be the friend you spoke of yesterday, I presume?"

"My name is Lefille Grakis."

"A pleasure to meet you. I'm Hatsumi's mother, Yukio."

Lefille bowed to greet Yukio, but looked back up blinking in astonishment. Really, she was surprised to hear Yukio introduce herself as Hatsumi's mother. Yukio, just like Kiyoshiro, looked far too young to be the parent of a high schooler.

"You're very beautiful," Lefille remarked, straightening herself out.

"Oh my, how flattering. You'll make girls cry if you continue to act so gallant all the time, you know?" Yukio giggled.

"Well, I'm not as bad as Suimei-kun in that regard."

"Teehee, you certainly have a point there."

"I feel like I've been the butt of way more than my fair share of jokes the past two days..."

Both women got a good giggle at Suimei's expense, and he took the opportunity to cut to the chase about his visit.

"Yukio-san, where's the instructor right now?"

"In the dojo for practice."

"Aah, so they're at it today, huh?"

Suimei's tone betrayed how troublesome he found this development. If he went to the dojo now, then he would end up bumping into the other students... whom he really didn't get along with. It was entirely likely some of them would complain if he suddenly showed up with an outsider.

But, seeing no point in brooding over the possibility, he pushed the thought out of his mind. All else aside, he was determined to introduce Lefille to Kiyoshiro.

"Please come right this way," Yukio beckoned.

Lefille and Suimei took off their shoes and followed Yukio into the house. Stepping out onto the porch, they were met with a beautiful, scrupulously maintained garden. It had an elegance to it that couldn't be found in the other world, and Lefille sighed in admiration as she looked over it.

"I bet Lady Rumeya would love to enjoy a drink here while looking up at the moon."

“Aah, yeah, I can totally see the guild master doing that.”

Suimei and Lefille continued to chat as Yukio guided them to the dojo. Once there, she opened the sliding door for them, revealing Kiyoshiro’s students all sitting neatly in a row—including Hatsumi.

It seemed they were about to receive some manner of instruction, or perhaps they were meditating. When Suimei entered, however, a small commotion ran through the dojo. That was only to be expected, as Suimei’s appearance was likely quite a surprise for most of them.

What was someone who never showed up for practice doing at the dojo now? That was inevitably the question on everyone’s mind; their cold looks Suimei’s way said it all. You see, the other students interpreted Suimei’s lack of attendance at the dojo as a lack of sincerity. In truth he had a good reason for his waywardness, but he naturally couldn’t tell the other students about it.

Ignoring the other students for now, Suimei went to pray at the shrine and Lefille followed suit.

“Suimei-kun, it doesn’t appear that we’re very welcome here...”

“That’s my fault. Sorry. You’ll just have to put up with the awkward atmosphere.”

As the two of them whispered to each other and finished their prayers, Suimei suddenly realized something.

“Oh, hey, Haseto. You’re back?”

“I am. It’s been a while, Suimei-san.”

A handsome boy who looked much like Kiyoshiro bowed and greeted Suimei. He had long hair with slicked-back bangs, and wore a typical dojo gi with a wooden sword slung at his side. This was Hatsumi’s little brother, Kuchiba Haseto.

“You already heard the story, right?”

“Yeah, you really went and did something pretty outrageous, Suimei-san.”

“Hey, what’s with that? You’re making it sound like it was my fault.”

“Hahaha, I’m just kidding.”

Suimei shot a reproachful gaze at Haseto, who began laughing cheerfully. Right now, he both looked and sounded just like his father. Suimei had been friends with Haseto ever since they were children, the same as Hatsumi. And since they’d grown up together, Haseto held a fair bit of respect for Suimei.

As Suimei was having a chat with his younger cousin for the first time in a while, a sharp voice suddenly rang out through the room.

“Hey, you! What do you think you’re doing, showing your face at the dojo after all this time?”

“Hmm? Oh, Suwa-san.”

Indeed, Suimei’s antagonizer was Suwa—a young man who could be considered one of the hopefuls among the students at the dojo. He had confidence in his own abilities and was the type to put on an act as one of the most senior students, which was likely why he stepped forward now. In stark contrast to his impertinent glare, however, Suimei simply shrugged his shoulders with indifference.

“Hey now, cut it out,” Kiyoshiro immediately interjected to put a stop to things.

“But instructor!” Suwa argued.

“You’re in the presence of a guest.”

“But this sets a bad example for the younger students.”

“It does, does it? Hmm...”

Kiyoshiro’s attitude was ambiguous. It was like he wasn’t sure if he should intervene anymore. Hatsumi, on the other hand, looked quite irritated with Suwa’s attitude and was starting to get rather restless.

It was objectively true that Suimei had to go overseas for his mystical work quite frequently, so he often couldn’t participate in practice. He’d also been told by his father that pursuing the sword too much would prevent him from becoming an accomplished magician. And so, considering Suimei’s infrequent appearances at the dojo, it was perhaps a matter of course that the other students thought he was lazy and noncommittal. Kiyoshiro was fully aware of Suimei’s circumstances, however, so he was of a different mind altogether.

That said, the students had no way of knowing what was really going on with Suimei. That’s why Kiyoshiro chose not to chide them for it when they began clamoring noisily. This was where he would ordinarily let out a soft roar to hush the class, but he showed no signs of doing so now. He simply tossed a loaded look Suimei’s way. He seemed to be saying that if Suimei didn’t do something about this soon, it would just keep happening forever.

“Hey! Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?”

“...”

“Are you ignoring me?!”

Suimei let out a sigh as Suwa’s remarkably loud voice resounded through the dojo again. He was exasperated that a guy like Suwa called himself a swordsman. He wanted to remind him that the dojo was a place for Zen meditation, so it would do him some good to cool his jets.

Seeing that Suimei had no intention of replying to him, however, Suwa was prepared to make his point a different way. But as soon as he made to stand...

“Shut up.”

Though Suimei only muttered those two words, they were more than enough to suppress the entire dojo. Their force silenced everyone with a magician’s psychic chill. Suimei’s mystical presence also dropped the temperature in the room several degrees. It was almost as if all the blabbering mouths had been frozen shut. Everyone’s eagerness to gripe about Suimei was dispelled like an illusion.

Seeing them shut down so easily, Suimei let out another sigh. Passing a glance over the sorry souls who could offer no resistance despite all their talk mere moments ago, Suimei only spotted five or so people, Kiyoshiro included, who weren’t affected by his pressure. After briefly assessing the situation, Suimei walked over to Suwa and looked down at him with his blazing red eyes. In response, the young man stiffened up as if completely paralyzed.

“I kept quiet because that was the sportsmanlike thing to do, but I’m the senior disciple here. You’d do well to bear that in mind.”

“Ugh... B-But...”

“If you have something to say, I suggest you keep it to yourself until you learn how to move under pressure like this... Well, I guess I can’t ask that much of you. At the very least, forge your nerve enough that you can talk properly, ‘kay?”

There, Suimei turned around to go back to Lefille, but stopped and looked over his shoulder upon suddenly remembering something.

“One last thing: I finished the training you’re doing now when I was about ten.”

Suimei then dispersed the pressure he exerted over the room, and surprised voices gradually began filling the dojo once more. After a short while, a stifled laugh could be heard from the far side

of the room. Indeed, Kuchiba Kiyoshiro could hardly contain himself.

“Pfft... Suimei, don’t go freezing up my dojo.”

“My apologies.”

Suimei earnestly bowed in apology, and Suwa turned to Kiyoshiro.

“I-Instructor, about what he just said...”

“Aah, that? You heard him. Suimei completed all the fundamental training when he was twelve. Circumstances aside, he’s got at least enough skill to be the head coach around here.”

Suwa turned a desperate look on a middle-aged man with the appearance of a bear—the current head coach of the Kuchiba dojo.

“C-Coach...” Suwa practically pleaded.

“The Yakagi boy is more of a veteran in this dojo than any of the assistant instructors. What the instructor says is absolutely true,” the coach claimed.

And it was true; Suimei had started learning swordsmanship from Kiyoshiro the day the dojo was built. In a sense, Suimei was his first disciple.

“Boy,” the coach called, turning to Suimei. “If you acted with such overpowering dignity all the time, then you’d earn a bit more respect around here. Right, Instructor?”

“Of course. You’re talking about the son of the man I idolized as my brother, you know? There’s no way he’s weak. Those of you who don’t realize that are just being swindled. Ain’t that right, Hatsumi?”

“I-I at least knew he was strong!”

“Really now?”

Suimei bashfully scratched the back of his head as he listened to Hatsumi and Kiyoshiro’s exchange. In the middle of it, he heard a clap from the shrine behind him where a girl was offering a prayer.

She had long, black hair, but its indigo sheen was strikingly different than the deep jet of Hydemary’s locks. She also had beauty marks under both her eyes and had a very traditional Japanese beauty to her features. She was the very embodiment of Yamato Nadeshiko, with an air about her even more graceful and serene than Yukio’s. Her presence right now was also so slight that anyone else would have easily overlooked her.

“Itsuki?”

“It’s been quite a while, Yakagi-san.”

The girl replied to Suimei with a gentle smile as she bowed her head. She was a student of another school, learning the basics of the Kuchiba style from Kiyoshiro. She was quite skilled, however, and was about on par with Hatsumi. She was strong enough that Suimei couldn't hold a candle to her in terms of swordsmanship.

"I felt a chill earlier. Did something happen?" she asked.

"Nothing much. Sorry for being out of touch," Suimei replied.

"Don't mention it. I was worried, but I didn't think any serious harm would come of it considering the two of you were involved."

"Have you already sparred with Hatsumi?"

"Yes. We borrowed the garden earlier today for three matches."

Suimei looked quizzically over at Hatsumi, who boldly smiled back at him.

"One win, one loss, one tie," she declared.

"Even as you are now?" Suimei asked.

"Yup. That's Itsuki-san for you. It was an eye-opening experience."

There, Hatsumi and Itsuki exchanged a smile. They were about the same age, so they got along quite well.

Itsuki then looked at Lefille. Her eyes were visibly filled with a strong will, glimmering with a fiery light. It seemed she'd completely pegged Lefille's talents, and as though to confirm her suspicions...

"You also appear to be quite skilled."

"And it sounds like you're able to compete with Lady Hatsumi. I would love to have a bout with you."

"As would I, if the opportunity presents itself."

Lefille focused a bit of her fighting spirit towards her, and the instant she did, the area around Itsuki was dominated by silence. All sound died—the stillness in the air was so unnatural that there was no other way to describe it. Not even the slightest movement or a single breath could be heard.

Seeing this, Suimei spoke up in a fluster.

"H-Hey, Itsuki. I brought Lefille here to see the instructor. Sorry, but could you save this for later?"

"Pardon me. I just got caught up in the moment."

Itsuki dispelled her pressure, allowing sound to slowly revive in the area around her. She then flashed a smile.

"Then, if you'll excuse me..."

With that, she bowed and headed for an empty space on the

dojo floor where she took a seat on her knees.

“I see. What uniform excellence...”

“She, Hatsumi, Haseto, and Kenta-san are special.”

As Suimei and Lefille were whispering to each other, he suddenly seemed to realize something.

“Oh, Instructor. About etiquette...”

“Don’t worry about that. The sun would set before we could teach her everything.”

Suimei guided Lefille over to and took a seat in front of Kiyoshiro. Judging that she probably wasn’t used to sitting on her knees, he bid her take a more relaxed posture as Kiyoshiro began speaking to her.

“So, you’re the one in need of advice?”

“Yes. My name is Lefille Grakis.”

“I’ve been told the gist of things. Now, make yourself comfortable.”

“Thank you for your consideration.”

Lefille lightly bowed her head, then looked up once more to take a good look at Kiyoshiro’s face...

“...”

At his very, very peculiar face.

“What is it?”

“Pardon me, but I was told that you’re Lady Hatsumi’s father.”

“Yup, that’s me.”

“Just like your wife, you appear... quite youthful.”

“Well, I guess so. Nevertheless, I’m turning 45 this year.”

“...”

Lefille was stunned by Kiyoshiro’s statement. Yukio looked like she might be right around thirty, but Kiyoshiro looked even younger than that.

“He’s a total monster,” interjected Haseto.

“A legit monster,” echoed Hatsumi.

“He really is,” confirmed Suimei.

Kiyoshiro looked depressed upon hearing such comments from his son, daughter, and nephew.

“You guys...”

But all three of them averted their gazes simultaneously as if they’d coordinated it. They were perfectly in sync.

Moving on, Suimei turned to question Lefille.

“So, what are your first impressions?”

"It's frightening..."

"Hmm?"

"How do I put it? He looks completely normal. I don't doubt that he's strong since you claim he is, but I just don't see it."

"I bet not. He's a total scam artist."

"Funny hearing that from the compulsive swindler."

Lefille quipped back at Suimei, who stuck his tongue out at her. Interrupting their banter, Kiyoshiro suddenly got to his feet.

"Well, let's get started."

"Really? Aren't you in the middle of practice?"

"That's no object. Just watching will be good training for them."

Kiyoshiro walked over to the wall where several wooden swords were placed. He let his gaze wander over them as if trying to pick one out. His discerning eyes were... not exactly as sharp as an eagle's. He looked more like an amateur dubiously assessing a bunch of bonsai trees.

He groaned as he looked at the swords with uncertainty until one seemed to catch his fancy.

"Let's see... We don't have any good substitutes for your weapon here, but will this do?"

Kiyoshiro held out a long wooden sword to Lefille. It was a little shorter than her usual blade and far slimmer, but it was the closest match the dojo had. Lefille looked completely bewildered that Kiyoshiro had picked it out without asking her a single thing.

"Um, by my weapon, you mean...?"

"It's a huge thing, about your height with a broad blade, right? Something like a greatsword, yeah?"

Kiyoshiro answered Lefille with the grin of a mischievous child. Lefille looked to Suimei with a quizzical gaze as if to ask him if he'd told Kiyoshiro about her weapon beforehand, but Suimei shook his head. All he'd told the instructor was that there was a swordswoman he'd like him to meet. He hadn't gone into much detail.

"I can tell at least that much."

That's just how Kiyoshiro was. The way he was practically bragging and the way he broke into a cackle gave the slightest glimpse into his abnormality that wasn't ordinarily apparent.

Nevertheless, Lefille grasped the wooden sword in her hands and flashed a hopeful smile. She realized just how beyond her

Kiyoshiro was, which piqued her interest in him as a swordswoman. And just as she took a stance...

“Hmm? Now that’s something...” Kiyoshiro muttered.

He’d likely figured something out just from seeing her stance. Fighters ordinarily aimed to strike stances that revealed no openings, but even the slightest fault allowed Kiyoshiro to see right through someone—an experienced warrior like Lefille included.

Lefille held the grip of her wooden sword with both hands with her elbows pressed against her sides. As for Kiyoshiro, he stood there casually with a wooden sword resting over his shoulder. That was all he was doing. But the second Lefille stepped forward, their match began.

Yet there was no ferocity in it at all. Rather, both fighters were moving like this was a light sparring session. Even from Suimei’s perspective, Lefille hardly seemed like herself. This was far too docile compared to how she usually overwhelmed her opponent with heavy strikes. And normally, no matter how much strength she put behind her blows, she would shout out with each and every swing of her blade.

But her current predicament was Kiyoshiro’s handiwork. No matter how much strength one put into their sword, no matter how hard one tried to pressure him with their fighting spirit, the moment Kiyoshiro swung his blade, his opponent had to move in direct response. They were forced to do so. If they didn’t, there was no way they could stop him. Lefille’s superior instinct told her that much.

Lefille gripped her sword with both palms while Kiyoshiro wielded his singlehandedly. Even using all of her strength, her wooden blade never reached him. But Kiyoshiro... Whenever he pushed forward, Lefille was pushed back even when she tried to hold her ground for all she was worth.

This was, of course, not because of the difference in muscular strength between a man and a woman. Lefille’s physical strength was backed by supernatural power, and Kiyoshiro wasn’t as delicate a man as his looks suggested either.

If Lefille’s opponent had been Hatsumi, they would have at least exchanged a technique or two. But with Kiyoshiro, nary a technique was to be seen. All Lefille could do was swing her wooden sword and meet the blows coming at her.

It was a simple match in that regard, but in the most sublime

way. When one studied martial arts and reached this stage of enlightenment, even the smallest of their movements was supernatural. It was remarkably strange. Logic couldn't explain it. It didn't match their skills. This was the very height of fighting as an art form, but the scales were completely tilted in Kiyoshiro's favor.

As the match played out, surprised voices filled the room.

"I can't believe she's held out this long..."

"She's even pushing back."

Kiyoshiro's students knew the preposterous extent of his skills, and praised Lefille for holding out against him accordingly.

But not too long after that, the fight seemed to reach a breaking point. Both parties took a few steps backward, gaining distance from one another while keeping their eyes locked on each other. Kiyoshiro was completely relaxed, while Lefille was dripping with sweat and panting heavily. Then, unable to stand any longer, she fell to her knees.

"Suimei-kun... How much time has passed?"

"Maybe five minutes? What, you couldn't tell?"

"No... My sense of time is a mess."

That was just how hard she'd been concentrating. It was fatal in battle to lose all track of one's surroundings, but even with Lefille's skill and experience, that was how intensely she'd had to focus in order to hold her own against Kiyoshiro.

"Grandmaster, could I ask you for another round?"

"No, take a rest."

"But I still have..."

"You still have energy to spare? Don't give me that. You won't get stronger just from panicking, you know?"

Kiyoshiro remonstrated Lefille after a moment's respite. Though she was full of zeal from their match, she managed to keep her cool and treat Kiyoshiro with the utmost respect.

"I understand. But I need to get stronger as soon as possible."

"That's why you want to cross swords again, even if it's just once more?"

"Yes."

"Well, I get where you're coming from. But, you know, there's no shortcut to getting strong. You still won't make any progress just panicking."

"..."

Lefille was unconvinced. Even if she didn't show her

displeasure, that much was clear from the look in her eyes. Kiyoshiro could understand this as well.

“Then let me show you the ultimate blade that anybody can use.”

Very suddenly, Kiyoshiro held his sword above him in an upper stance. Just an upper stance—a simple, perfectly normal stance. There was nothing more to it than that. No matter how hard Lefille stared at him, that was all she could see. He didn’t appear to be concealing some manner of outrageous technique or spectacular move.

“Grandmaster... You don’t mean to say it’s just a downward strike, do you?”

“Bingo. That’s exactly it.”

“And you’re saying such a simple strike is the ultimate blade?”

Lefille was skeptical. She looked at Kiyoshiro dubiously, perhaps wondering if he was making fun of her. Kiyoshiro, however, remained completely calm.

“Taking such a simple strike to its very extremes is the most difficult accomplishment of all. Even I haven’t reached that peak. There might be three people in the entire world who have. Now, behold!”

Kiyoshiro let out a spirited shout; both it and what happened next took everyone in the dojo completely by surprise. By the time they felt the illusory sensation of Kiyoshiro’s fighting spirit singing their skin like hot wind... the tip of his wooden sword was already pointed at the dojo floor.

Even with a magician’s eyes, Suimei couldn’t follow the sword’s trajectory. It could be described as nothing other than a flash of lightning. Not even Lefille, who had been standing directly in front of Kiyoshiro, had been able to react to it.

When exactly had he swung? No, that wasn’t even the right question to ask. The very moment he’d taken his stance, his swing was a foregone conclusion.

A vertical slash from top to bottom was the ultimate blade. It was a strike used by extracting faith from such a belief. Kiyoshiro wasn’t ridiculing anybody by calling it that, and his sword smashed through all other preconceptions.

That’s why it was the ultimate blade. It was simple... No, it was simply unbelievable.

“...”

Lefille stood there dumbfounded like she'd just witnessed a bolt out of the blue. Was she looking at Kiyoshiro's hands, or his sword?

"Anyone strong uses this strike. The more you defy the force pulling your sword toward the ground, the more vigor your blade loses. No matter what you try to do, it's impossible to cancel that out entirely."

Kiyoshiro recited his guidance like a poem, then posed a question to the dumbfounded Lefille.

"Say, Lefille. When you watched that just now, could you see yourself doing the same thing? You couldn't, right? That means you don't have the proper groundwork to even imagine it."

"Th-That's..."

"To extrapolate, you're not doing what you should be doing. You're trying to learn what I used in a single bound, and while in your current state no less. When you act so recklessly, you'll lose sight on the path of the blade."

"B-But... I have to get stronger. Is it wrong to desire such a thing?"

"Well, you see... When you reach your level, the question at hand is no longer as simple as what kind of training you should be doing or what goal you should be setting for yourself. That's why..." Kiyoshiro paused there for a moment, then continued with conviction, "You shouldn't be searching for answers to simple questions like what you could or should be doing. Even if you find an answer and begin chasing it, it's nothing more than a mare's nest of your own making. That won't get you anywhere. If you wish to seek a goal, then you should change your mindset."

"My... mindset?"

"That's the other problem with your sword. Your refusal to lose is too strong, see?"

"That's... true."

Lefille acknowledged Kiyoshiro's observation. Just as he'd said, Lefille was determined to win the fight she had ahead of her. It was only natural that her refusal to lose was stronger than ever.

"The long-cherished ambition of all swordsmen is to die by the sword. They spend all their days thinking about the sword, and they don't consider their lives complete until they die fighting. And if you're not ready to die by the blade at any time, you'll never truly become strong. That's why swordsmen are endlessly optimistic and bask in elegance. It's so that they can leave this world with no

regrets whenever their time does come. Have you ever known anyone like that?”

“...”

Lefille was at a loss for words, and with good reason. There was someone who came to mind immediately: Rumeya Tails. She was the closest swordmaster to Lefille, and certainly enjoyed her fair share of optimism and elegance. Kiyoshiro seemed to pick up on Lefille’s reaction and flashed a bold smile.

“So you do know one, huh? Then you should understand what I’m telling you.”

After saying that, Kiyoshiro held his wooden sword sideways and made an unprompted remark.

“The mindset of a swordsman before a match is to become one with their blade. There is no room for leisure like victory or defeat. The moment you stand before your enemy, you cast yourself aside. The more you fear defeat, the more it will hold you back. And when you can no longer move forward at all, your blade will never reach your enemy no matter what you do. That’s the kind of situation that drives you to recklessness, isn’t it?”

“?!”

Kiyoshiro’s analysis was harshly accurate. Lefille had in fact been fixated on victory until now and subsequently quite reckless in battle. Unable to push forward, she took risk after risk to seize victory, claiming her life was worthless all the while.

“How’s that? Makes sense, right? The root of your panic isn’t the fact that you make light of your own life, but rather the fact that you make light of how you use your life.”

Lefille’s arms dangled languidly at her sides. Kiyoshiro had hit the bullseye in such a way that it was hard for Lefille to acknowledge. It was true that she’d fought many a battle downplaying the value of her life. And it was in doing so that she’d slipped off the proper path of swordsmanship—more concerned about victory than her blade.

In short, that was the difference mindset made. A real swordsman was prepared to risk their life, and anyone else panicked at the very thought. “If I do that, I’ll lose. If I do this, I’ll lose.” Such thoughts and fears become an obstruction that kept a swordsman from fighting the way they should.

Become one with the sword and welcome death.

Such is the mindset of a true swordsman, and the path they

follow to attain victory.

“That mindset may contradict your way of life. However, if you want to win by the sword, you’ll need to cut yourself free of all such hesitation. You’ll spend your life not just to win, but to win by the sword. Fearing what comes after your death isn’t cowardice; it’s apathy.”

After declaring that to be the key tenet of swordsmanship, Kiyoshiro suddenly took on a relaxed posture.

“Now, to wrap things up, let me show you my serious side.”

No sooner than those words left his mouth, a pressure blew through the room that far surpassed the hot wind of the fighting spirit he’d displayed earlier. This felt more like a force that crushed all in its path, condensed into a single wave like a tsunami. Even as a high grand class magician fortified by the mysteries, Suimei was experiencing vertigo under the swordsman’s pressure.

Meanwhile, Lefille fell to the floor. Taking a look at her, she was trembling as if she’d seen dread incarnate. It was the unmistakable fear of witnessing the very peak of swordsmanship.

But after a moment, Kiyoshiro readily dispersed his pressure and cracked a smile.

“After swinging my sword for thirty-odd years, I finally reached this stage. The man I admired was like this around the time he was Suimei’s age, but he was an exception even among exceptions.”

“Will I... also be able to reach that stage too?”

Kiyoshiro let out a tired sigh at Lefille’s question.

“Before we get to that... Your approach is all wrong. Why do you think you can’t get stronger? With your power, it shouldn’t be all that hard to do, right? It should be way easier for you than it was for me, who only had questionable talent to begin with. Granted, that’s only if you continue down your path properly without giving up on your...”

Kiyoshiro paused there for a moment, then looked to Suimei upon realizing something.

“Hey, Suimei, is this why you brought her here?”

“Well, yeah.”

That was exactly the reason. If Lefille were told by someone far stronger than herself that she could become stronger, it would be like a glimmer of hope. Suimei’s way of showing her the light may have been a little imprudent, but it was undoubtedly necessary for someone like Lefille who didn’t have much time before her fight to

come. And upon putting all this together, Kiyoshiro began scratching his head.

“Well, about that... Let me give you one more piece of advice.”

Lefille corrected her posture and readied herself so that she wouldn’t miss a single word Kiyoshiro was to utter. As for the sage advice that left his lips...

“Go sightseeing.”

“Huh?”

“This is your first time in Japan, right?”

“Y-Yes.”

“So don’t give a single thought to your sword. Empty your mind and enjoy yourself. This is another form of mental training.”

“What do you mean...?”

“I mean that your mind needs a change of pace. Do enough of it, and you’ll get the hang of it. What you need to do right now is to devote yourself to comfort. If your body can get used to that, you’ll eventually learn to master elegance.”

“Elegance...”

It was the same thing Rumeiya had said—that Lefille needed to calm down her agitated heart which had become fixated on victory. She had to train her mind so that she could wield her sword with elegance and brandish her own power.

And so, after telling Lefille that was what she needed, Kiyoshiro returned to his seat at the head of the dojo.



Suimei’s first few days back in Japan were dizzyingly hectic. He spent most of his time running around from one thing to another. He had to explain his circumstances to the Japanese branch; manage all of the problems stemming from his prolonged absence at school; use magicka to smooth things over for Reiji, Mizuki, and Hatsumi too; and lastly, use magicka to reconcile things with Reiji and Mizuki’s families. And, once all of that business was finally settled, he was finally able to get to his real work.

As for the visitors from another world, Lefille spent her time visiting the Kuchiba dojo next door, while Felmenia and Liliana spent their time poring over the grimoires of the Yakagi estate’s study as well as watching videos on the internet and talking about magicka with Hydemary. Essentially, the three of them spent their

time as they pleased while Suimei tended to his business.

They all took the time, however, to visit the Kuchiba residence together to feast on a Japanese meal Yukio had prepared for them. Suimei would never forget the exasperated look Haseto gave him that night.

But once Suimei had finally taken care of everything in Japan, all that was left was visiting the Society's headquarters in Germany and dealing with the work left to him by the Thousand Nights Association. Suimei explained this to the girls, and they were currently in the living room discussing their plans and what they wanted to do before departing for Europe.

"I want to try that cake Lady Hatsumi spoke of."

That was Lefille's personal request. She actually had quite a sweet tooth, and had already made it known she was interested in sampling new desserts.

"I want... to go see penguins."

Meanwhile, Liliana was unable to forget the animals she'd seen on television. Suimei thought her first request would be to visit the zoo, but it actually turned out to be the aquarium.

"What about you, Menia?"

"I would like to visit a bookstore, although watching videos has already been quite educational."

As Felmenia said, simply watching videos was a great way to see and learn new things. Just watching footage of a natural phenomenon could serve as inspiration for a new spell, for example. And since Felmenia's main priority here in Suimei's world was learning, there wasn't anywhere in particular she especially wanted to go like the other girls. She was content to leave their itinerary up to them.

"How will we get around?"

"I already called my driver. He should be here soon."

Suimei didn't have a license, so he normally relied on his exclusive chauffeur for transportation. Said chauffeur was, naturally, also a Society magician.

Once they were all ready, Suimei, Felmenia, Lefille, Liliana, and Hydemary left the house and found a black van waiting for them. A young man wearing a grey suit was standing next to it. He had porcelain skin and black, neatly trimmed hair. Rather than merely calm and gentle, it was more accurate to say he had an absolutely tranquil air about him. As Suimei and company drew closer, the

young man gave a serene bow.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting, young master.”

“Don’t worry about it. Thank you for escorting us, Akitsuki-san.”

Suimei lightly bowed back to his chauffeur, Akitsuki. Felmenia and the others followed suit, each of them briefly introducing themselves in the process. Once that was done, Liliana tugged on Suimei’s sleeve.

“So... you really are... a stinking rich boy, Suimei?” she asked.

“Stinking...? Could you maybe not put it like that?” he replied.

“But there’s no mistaking that you’re quite rich,” Lefille countered.

“This man even called you ‘young master,’” Felmenia agreed.

The girls were rightfully astonished. How could they *not* see him as some sort of nobility after seeing how he lived? To them, this was the equivalent of Suimei having his own personal carriage at his beck and call. There was no way they would ever think of him as a commoner again. Granted, perhaps this realization was a bit late after they’d already seen the size of the estate where he lived.

Seemingly quite interested in automobiles, Felmenia then tried touching the black van.

“I’ve seen them on television, but how does such a thing actually move?” she asked, brimming with curiosity.

“Allow me to explain,” Akitsuki answered with a grin. “It burns fuel as a source of power to propel it forward.”

“Oh... Could it be that you know about us already?”

“Yeah,” Suimei interjected. “I’ve given Akitsuki-san the rundown already, so you don’t need to be cagey around him.”

He couldn’t say much for Akitsuki’s reaction, however—which had simply been, “Is that so? Understood.” But Akitsuki had been involved with the Yakagis since Kazamitsu’s generation. Much like Hatsumi’s parents, he was likely already convinced anything was possible when it came to this family.

“Sorry I’m late!”

After the group chatted for a while longer, Hatsumi came running over. She wasn’t wearing the uniform she always had on, but rather a cute, casual ensemble that included a skirt, headband, and corsage.

“Oh, you’re here as well.”

“Hi, Akitsuki-san. Thank you for driving us today.”

“But of course.”

Hatsumi greeted Akitsuki, then exchanged good mornings with everyone else. Then, when it was finally time to depart...

“Who wants shotgun?”

“Shotgun?”

“Oh, I mean the seat next to the driver.”

When Suimei explained it, all three visitors from another world began fidgeting with excitement. It was clear they all wanted to try it, but they were too considerate of one another to be the first to jump at the opportunity.

“Are you three okay with taking turns?”

“C-Certainly!”

“Yup!”

“Yes...”

And, with that, the otherworldly visitors boarded a car for the first time. They were all surprised at how soft the seats were. Carriages where they were from didn't have luxuries like pillowed seats with springs, so the amenities available here made an immediate impression.

When everyone was settled in, Akitsuki pulled an envelope from his briefcase.

“For you, young master.”

The envelope had no sender, but Suimei knew exactly who it was from. It was nearly identical to the letter he'd received from the courier the other day from the Thousand Nights Association.

“Why do you have this, Akitsuki-san?”

“It was delivered to the branch office this morning. I was asked to pass it along while I was here.”

“So they want this taken care of sooner rather than later...”

Suimei opened the envelope and, just as he expected, found additional materials on the previous enforcement request.

“...”

“Young master?”

“It's nothing... Shall we get going?”

Suimei urged his driver to start the car. The letter was important business, but there was nothing he could do about it while he was still in Japan, so he settled on prioritizing today's plans.

“Now then, where to first?”

“Well, let’s start with the shop in front of the station so we can buy some snacks. After that...”

“I-I want to go... to the aquarium!”

Liliana was the first to pipe up. She wasn’t usually the type to demand anything, but her desire to see more animals was unbearable. The way she was bouncing up and down in her seat was also rather adorable. Suimei turned to the other girls to see if they were fine with the suggestion, and the four of them nodded obligingly.

“The aquarium it is, then. Sounds like we’ll be starting there, Akitsuki-san.”

“Certainly.”

Akitsuki turned the key and started the car. The internal combustion engine roared, and all three visitors from another world expressed their surprise upon witnessing a car come to life for the first time.

“W-Wah!”

“Now this is...”

“It’s... amazing. There’s nothing... mystical about it... at all.”

The three of them were looking around at the seats and windows, trying to identify the source of the sounds and vibrations. Akitsuki gave them a brief explanation of what was happening, which helped put them at ease.

In any case, the first stop of the day was the convenience store in front of the train station. After casually picking out some snacks for the trip, they finally got to relax and sample the goods. Felmenia choked up with tears of joy upon her first taste.

“Chocolate... This must be the food of the gods.”

The staples for such a declaration in Japan were chocolate, mayonnaise, and pudding. And Felmenia just so happened to have a chocolate bar in her hands as she exaltedly thanked the heavens.

“This cream puff thing... is very tasty. Hom.”

“To think this world has sweets that rival cotton candy and cake... This so-called ice cream is superb.”

All three visitors from another world were in high spirits as they sampled their treats, or more precisely, wholeheartedly devoured them. They’d picked out sweet and salty snacks that complemented each other as perfectly as good sake and fish. Moreover, with Hydemary present, a lively discussion began over which snacks were better than others.

Suimei and Hatsumi watched the four of them enjoying themselves with charmed smiles.

“Don’t eat too much, you three. Junk food’s bad for you if you don’t keep it in moderation,” he cautioned.

“I-I suppose these *are* luxury goods...” Felmenia conceded.

“Besides, we’ve got the main course coming up. You’ll miss out if you fill up now, you know?” Hatsumi added.

“Oh! You’re right! There’s still the cake!” Lefille shouted in excitement.

She was very much so looking forward to the cake, and immediately retracted her outstretched hand when Hatsumi reminded her of it. Meanwhile, the one girl who didn’t understand such moderation cocked her head in an innocent manner.

“Is that so?” Hydemary asked.

“You’re an exception,” Suimei retorted.

Junk food was a dietary staple for Hydemary, who aspired to live the childhood dream. It should have been bad for her health, yet it didn’t seem to pose the slightest problem in Hydemary’s case. Perhaps it was a perk of being a homunculus, but how exactly did that even work?

As Suimei pondered over this, he spotted Felmenia reaching out for another snack.

“Th-Then, just one more. Just one last—”

“I’m telling you to stop.”

“Aah?!”

Suimei grasped Felmenia’s outstretched hand, which was trembling like a junkie’s, and confiscated the chocolate bar she was going for.

“Suimei-donooo, that’s so cruel...”

“Seriously. These are bad for you if you eat too many. How many were you planning on having?”

Suimei decided to do Felmenia a favor and get rid of the temptation himself. But the moment he unwrapped the foil, Felmenia lunged at him with a glint in her eyes.

“Om!”

“H-Hey! Menia! The hell are you doing?! Hey! You’re drooling on my finger!”

“Nom! This is your fault for stealing my chocolate, Suimei-dono!”

“Don’t cling to me like that! Um, Felmenia-san... Seriously,

please stop! Ugh, this isn't good!"

"H-Hang on! What are you two doing fooling around?!"

Suimei began squirming from the soft sensation coiling around him. Hatsumi, ready to tear the two of them apart in a fluster, reached forward from the back seat. The moment she did, however, Felmenia shot a sharp glare her way that stopped her in her tracks.

"What are you saying?! Were you not clinging to Suimei-dono yourself right after we teleported here?"

"Huh? Ah! Th-Th-Th-That was, um... I was overcome with emotion upon returning home! And all I did was lean against him a bit! He was no different than a wall!"

"So I'm a wall to you?! Isn't that a little mean?"

There, Hatsumi desperately looked to Lefille, who was just sitting there minding her own business.

"Besides! Lately he's just been caring for Lefille, right?!"

"Th-That's because Suimei-kun is helping me work out some problems... But now that you mention it, I suppose he has been rather attentive. Thank you, Suimei-kun."

"Huh? Oh, you're welcome..."

Suimei gave a bashful reply, but Felmenia began screeching.

"Unfair! That's utterly unfair!"

"Y-You were completely entranced with the grimoires in the study, weren't you?!"

"That's... Actually, what's that you're eating, Lefille?!"

"Cotton candy. It even crackles. It's rather amusing."

"I want some!"

With that, Felmenia changed her target and latched on to Lefille. Even though they were going at it mere seconds ago, she was now mysteriously being fed crackling cotton candy by hand.

"Weren't you two just arguing...?"

There was no logical connection between their argument and making up, but seeing that they were more or less enjoying themselves now, Suimei was secretly delighted that things were going well. The mood, however, changed suddenly when Felmenia noticed something outside the window and lost her composure.

"Suimei-dono, Suimei-dono!"

"Huh?"

"Wh-What... What in the world is that?!"

Drawn by those words, Lefille also looked out the window and furrowed her brow.

“Goodness. What an eerie shape. It seems to be some manner of grotesque creature.”

“Huh? A grotesque creature?”

What on earth were they talking about? Suimei didn’t have a clue. This was Japan. Modern Japan, no less. There shouldn’t be any grotesque creatures walking around in the middle of town in broad daylight. As puzzled as Felmenia was, Suimei looked out of her window to see... the town’s mascot.

“Grotesque indeed.”

“Wh-What is that thing...?”

“And who is that woman next to it? Has she enslaved the creature? She seems to have some manner of wand in her hand.”

“Such a profane figure... It’s likely under the influence of a great evil.”

Felmenia and Lefille recoiled defensively as they watched the cartoon mascot—which was a cross between a jellyfish and a bear—and the female staff member standing with it. It seemed that they’d mistaken the microphone in her hand for a magic wand. As for the mascot’s tentacles, they apparently looked like the manifestation of a great evil. Liliana spotted the creature shortly after the others did, and began accumulating mana so she would be prepared for anything.

As for those who knew exactly what the creature was... They were naturally all a little let down.

Akitsuki simply muttered, “Oh, Jellybear,” with a bitter smile.

Jellybear was a mysterious caricature of a bear with the body of a jellyfish, somewhat based on the octopus-shaped aliens that used to be popular back in the day. Apparently, the town committee had tried to capitalize on the bear-based characters that were also popular and ended up combining the two into this mysterious abomination.

And perhaps because that was simply the kind of character it was designed to be, Jellybear was constantly shaking. The discomfort that crept over anyone watching its body wriggle about made you wonder just what manner of insidious magicka was behind it.

Suimei and his friends had gone to see it around the time of its debut, and Mizuki’s first reaction was, “I can feel my sanity slowly being drained.” The simple act of looking at it made one feel anxious—even Suimei, whose body was steeped in the mysteries.

For the benefit of everyone who didn't know, Hydemary then began explaining the monstrosity.

"That's not a creature, you see. It's a stuffed doll with a person inside of it."

"Stuffed...? It's not cute... at all."

"Seriously. Why is it so uncute, anyway? Aren't stuffed things supposed to be cute?"

Liliana and Lefille both loved cute things, so they were particularly offended by Jellybear.

"They made this bizarre chimera to capture local tastes. Japan sure is weird, isn't it?"

"Hey, we have cute mascots too."

"But that's just a small percentage of them, right?"

"I can't deny that..."

And so the day's trip got off to a rather surprising start.



Their first destination after the convenience store was the aquarium Liliana was hoping to see. Upon arriving, they made a beeline for the marine animal exhibits. Liliana was momentarily distracted by the large tanks filled with swimming sharks, but they couldn't win over cuteness. Liliana eyed the fish tanks in passing as she quickly made her way towards the animals she'd really come to see. Once they were finally in sight, Liliana raised an excited voice.

"I-It's the... seal I saw... on television!"

She sounded as exalted now as she did when she played with cats. However, the animals in question were...

"This is actually a sea lion."

"They're... different? So this is... a sea lion..."

Liliana listened attentively to the caretaker explaining things, and now understood the difference between the two animals. The caretaker and the sea lion then began playing catch, and Liliana's eyes were fixed on the rubber ball as they passed it back and forth. After enjoying this for some time, Liliana suddenly said in an envious tone...

"I want to... touch the sea lion..."

"You can't. Animals get stressed out when unfamiliar people touch them."

"Is... that so?"

Liliana was utterly despondent when Hatsumi told her it would be impossible. Suimei didn't seem to think so, however...

"Well, if you really want to touch them—"

"Magicka... right? Understood."

The instant she came to that conclusion, Liliana's lone eye lit up with a fiery passion and she began accumulating mana. A burning, prickling sensation slowly encroached on the air around them. And upon sensing it, Suimei naturally tried to stop her in a panic.

"No! Stop right there! Why did it come to that?!"

"Was I... wrong?"

"Yes! Seriously wrong!"

Liliana dismissed her mana and cutely cocked her head to the side. Hatsumi then shot a reproachful gaze Suimei's way.

"Isn't this really your fault, Suimei?"

"A-Are you saying I'm a bad influence?"

"I mean, you always go around casting that suggestive stuff willy-nilly, don't you? Liliana's just mimicking you."

"I only cast that out of sheer necessity!"

"Suimei, this is also... out of necessity."

"Huh? No, no, no, no, no! It's not the same!"

"See? I'm totally right."

With Liliana and Hatsumi both hitting him right where it hurt, Suimei was left in a complete fluster. And as he squirmed uncomfortably, Liliana flashed an impish smile.

"I was... just joking. I understand... the difference."

"Ugh..."

In the end, she was just pulling his leg. Liliana had learned how to handle Suimei lately, and was now capable of being quite mischievous. That said, because there were also times when she crawled into Suimei's bed like a spoiled child, he had a hard time putting up a strong front against her.

"But... I do still want... to touch it. What... should I do?"

"Well, the only option is to become a caretaker."

"A caretaker...?"

"That's what you call the people who take care of the animals here. Look, just like that guy over there."

Suimei pointed at the caretaker playing catch with the sea lion. They were showing off their cooperation and had all the guests around them smiling. The caretaker then fed the sea lion some fish and petted it, showing off how used to him the animal was.

“I’m really... jealous.”

Liliana stared at the caretaker enviously as she continued to watch the show with Suimei. It wasn’t long, however, before Hydemary and the other girls—who’d been off doing their own thing—showed back up.

“I bought a present for you, Liliana-chan.”

“A present?”

Hydemary didn’t appear to have anything of the like on her. But both Felmenia and Lefille, who’d gone with her, were grinning without saying a word. Suimei had a good guess as to what was about to happen, and smiled right along with them.

Hydemary took off her hat and flipped it over. After tapping the edge several times with her wand, a puff of smoke shot out from the bottom. When it vanished, there was a large stuffed penguin sitting snugly atop the hat.

“Ah! Penguin!”

“It’s the cutest and finest one I could find. Here you go.”

“Thank... you...”

Liliana thanked Hydemary and tightly squeezed the stuffed penguin with both arms. The look on her face said she might never let it go. She rubbed her cheek against the soft-looking toy, completely entranced with it.



“Heehee.”

Hydemary was giggling like an adoring older sister. She was, in fact, the younger of the two, but it seemed she’d taken such an attitude with Liliana because she was far more innocent.

“The penguin show will be beginning shortly.”

“P-Penguins!”

The sea lion followed the caretaker to the exit, and a new caretaker came in with a line of penguins behind her. Liliana was getting everything she wanted out of her aquarium trip, and she watched the new show with a sparkle in her eye.



After enjoying the aquarium, the group stopped at a dessert buffet to get their fill of cake. It was Lefille’s personal request, but in truth, all of the girls were looking forward to it.

Upon entering the shop, they were greeted with a lineup of cakes for the buffet. There were shortcakes, chocolate tortes, fruit tarts, cheesecakes, mille-feuilles, and much, much more. There were cakes of every size, shape, and color to dazzle the eye.

“Y-Y-Y-Y-You’re saying we can eat as much of this as we want?!”

“Ooh... This must be heaven...”

Lefille was unusually excited. Practically drooling, even. Felmenia sounded completely enraptured, and was offering her thanks to Alshuna. Liliana, however, suddenly realized something as she surveyed the shop, furrowing her brow with a troubled look on her face.

“I thought so... back at the aquarium too... but we really stand out.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Is it because... we look like... country bumpkins?”

“Nope, not at all.”

The three visitors from another world were indeed behaving something like country bumpkins in the big city, but because they looked more like foreign tourists, nobody was sneering at them or looking down on them. In fact, quite the opposite. A good deal of the attention they were getting was thanks to their looks, as every

single one of them was quite a beauty. They stood out even if they didn't want to, so it was only natural that all eyes fell on them. This was only further confirmed by the nasty looks and death glares Suimei was getting.

After settling in at their table, Hatsumi rose from her chair.

"I'm sure you guys aren't used to this, so I'll show you how it's done."

"Please do, Lady Hatsumi!"

"Hatsumi... is the ultimate hero!"

The visitors from another world all sang Hatsumi's praise. Suimei was then left at the table to mind their belongings while the girls took a lap around the buffet, eventually returning with jam-packed trays of cake. They were apparently intent on eating everything. Suimei also liked sweets, but he felt his stomach churning just from imagining the sheer amount of sugar.

Felmenia took her seat and was suddenly overcome with emotion.

"Such luxury... Even though I only came to this world out of a desire for knowledge..."

"Considering all that cake, I don't think knowledge is the only thing you were hungering for..."

"No! This too is in the pursuit of knowledge—the knowledge of making sweets!"

"What the hell kind of knowledge are you seeking again?"

"This isn't even everything, Suimei-dono!"

"And you plan on mastering absolutely everything, right?"

"Of course!"

Felmenia firmly clenched her fist in the air and let out a puff of air from her nose, such was her vigor. Suimei found this quite charming of her, but he could hear a stifled laugh from next to him.

"Hmm...? Lefi?"

"So light... And so, so very fluffy..."

Lefille began muttering while staring at a mound of whipped cream on her plate. Right now, she looked just like she did when she admired cotton candy as a little girl. She was far enough within her own world to rival Liliana's enthrallment when she was watching the animals on television.

"Heehee... I bet not even Princess Graziella has ever experienced such luxury."

Lefille finally returned to her senses and beheld the massive

quantity of cakes before her with a gaze somehow more dreadful than Felmenia's. She looked like a carnivore staring down its prey. Indeed, it seemed she was trying to decide where to start.

"Want me to take a picture so you can show off?"

"Oh, speaking of, shall we buy some as a souvenir to bring back as well?"

Contrary to Suimei's expectations, Lefille suggested something rather kind. What had spurred such a curious change in attitude? Suimei tried to recall Lefille's previous interactions with Graziella, but all that came to mind was the two of them hurling insults at each other.

"Do you two actually secretly get along somehow?"

"Certainly not! A souvenir would just be tangible evidence of such luxury! I have absolutely no intention of going out of my way to do anything for her!"

"But you *will* take her cake?"

"That's... Well, yes."

After watching Lefille talk herself into a corner, Suimei shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated manner.

"Yeah, okay, right. You don't get along at all."

"Mrgh! Don't think you've had me so easily!" Lefille declared vehemently as she sampled her first piece of cake. "Wow... This is delicious."

"I'm glad."

While Lefille and Suimei were going at it, Felmenia took a look around the table. Liliana was engrossed with chucking cakes into her mouth, while Hatsumi slowly worked away at a slice of matcha cake and Hydemary tried a bite of everything with great criticism. Felmenia then looked over at Suimei's tray.

"Oh? You didn't get much, Suimei-dono..."

"This'll be enough for me."

"This is 'cause Suimei suddenly developed a taste for bitter stuff at some point. Here, I got some dark chocolate cake for you."

"Oh, thanks, Hatsumi."

Hatsumi moved a slice of chocolate cake from her tray to Suimei's. As the two of them chatted away, Hydemary observed them with a critical gaze.

"That felt remarkably natural."

"This is it! This is where I sense a gap between the rest of us and Hatsumi-dono!"

Picking up what Hydemary was putting down, Felmenia suddenly began raising a fuss. Suimei had no idea why, but he could tell that the mood was taking a turn for the worse, and so he tried to smooth things over in a hurry.

"I mean, all she did was give me something she already had, right? Actually, what's even the big deal, anyway?"

"Th-Then here, Suimei-dono! This one is from me!"

Giving away her cake would mean that she'd have to go and get another slice, which doubled the effort—a realization Felmenia seemed to come to as Suimei accepted the cake from her.

"Here, half for you."

Suimei had expected this much, and began cutting the cake accordingly... when all of a sudden, Felmenia's eyes began sparkling.

"Aaaaah!"

Seeing this, Hatsumi and Lefille were shocked.

"Bwuh?!"

"Lady Felmenia! What are you doing amidst all this confusion?!"

With the two of them in a fluster, Suimei naturally fell into a fluster as well.

"Wh-What?! You want me to feed you?!"

"Exactly! Aaaaah!"

Felmenia had a huge smile plastered on her face as she grasped Suimei's hand and pleaded with him. Overpowered by her intensity, he wasn't quite sure what to say. Lefille, however, had a diplomatic proposal.

"Fine, then... But in exchange, we'll also do the same," she quietly mumbled.

"Very well," Felmenia agreed.

And so they settled on a deal, leaving the person in question entirely out of the decision.

"Wait, hang on... How'd it come to this?"

"Think nothing of it. Lady Hatsumi, you would also find it unfair if you didn't get to participate, right?"

"Wh-Why are you asking me?!"

"I was simply being polite. Does this mean you wish to be left out?"

"Hang on! I didn't say that! Suimei, feed me too!"

"I don't really get it... But if that's what you guys want, then

fine. There's no need to fight about it."

Suimei completely caved. It was somehow decided that he would be feeding the three of them cake. And at this juncture in the discussion, Hydemary finally piped up.

"So this is what you've been up to, Suimei-kun..."

"Don't act like this is normal. This is a... Well..."

He was about to say that this was a first, but suddenly realized he might be wrong about that.

"Hmph. You sure do get along."

"Well, yeah."

"..."

Hydemary looked out the window and continued to eat her cake in silence. Suimei could tell that she wasn't quite herself, and inquired about it with his head quizzically cocked to the side.

"Hey, Mary, you in a bad mood or something?"

"Not really."

"...?"

In the end, Suimei couldn't decipher the nuances of Hydemary's unexpected behavior.

Chapter 3: To the Society

After finishing up all of his business in Japan, Suimei was at last on his way to Germany. The main purpose of his trip was, of course, to visit the Society's main headquarters to explain his prolonged absence to the leader, and subsequently get permission to return to the other world once more.

The former would likely be no issue, as Suimei wasn't at fault for his prolonged absence, but there was some uncertainty regarding getting official permission to travel to another world. The Society fundamentally didn't meddle in the business of its affiliated magicians; its general stance was to allow them to do as they pleased so long as they refrained from wickedness that ran counter to the Society's ideals. The Society believed in allowing scholars of the mysteries to freely conduct their research and pursue any and every possibility open to them. It was up to the individual magician to decide on their own thesis, and if that thesis took them to another world, the Society was unlikely to raise an objection.

However, the Society was still an organization, so Suimei had to take potential red tape into consideration. He was both optimistic and nervous about his prospects, and that was the line he found himself riding during this journey. As for the journey itself, there was also no way Suimei could leave his three visitors behind while he was overseas. Liliana in particular needed to accompany him, as he was hoping to address the issue of her transformed body parts while he was in Germany.

And so Suimei booked a flight for four from Haneda Airport to Frankfurt am Main. It was a direct flight, meaning they'd spend half a day in the air. As everyone took their seats on the plane and began to settle in for the trip, Liliana turned a sudden question on Suimei.

"Suimei, is it okay... for Hero Hatsumi... to stay behind?"

"It's best if she stays home for a while. Time with her parents is important, right?"

"Right."

“It is.”

Felmenia and Lefille both agreed with Suimei on that point. Just as he'd implied, Hatsumi was staying in Japan in order to spend more time with her family and get lessons from Kiyoshiro.

“We’re in for much tougher battles now, so I have to get stronger too.”

That was what she'd said when she decided to stay behind. Rather than going to Germany for no particular reason, it was far more in keeping with Hatsumi's constant hunger for self-betterment to stay home and train.

But as for the group headed to Germany...

“You three need to relax a bit.”

“Easier said than done, Suimei-kun...”

“I still can't believe that such a large mass of metal can fly in the sky.”

“I can't... calm down.”

Liliana tightly grasped Suimei's hand from the window seat. She ordinarily never displayed her agitation this openly, but that just showed how anxious they all were about flying. Suimei gently placed his other hand over Liliana's as Hydemary poked her face up over the seat behind him.

“Suimei-kun's right. There's no need to be so tense,” she said.

“You're quite calm about this, Hydemary-dono,” Felmenia piped up.

“I go back and forth between Germany and Japan all the time, so I'm a frequent flyer. I'm used to it by now.”

Felmenia beheld Hydemary with awe-struck, admiring eyes.

“Now that's Hydemary-dono for you!”

“Mhm. Such is the dignity of the senior disciple.”

Hydemary, however, replied in a proud voice despite her expressionless face. Rather than reassuring the first-time flyers, it sounded more like she was just boasting. This, of course, wasn't of particular comfort to the anxious Felmenia, who was still trembling and just as pale as before.

“But, but... You know? If something were to happen and we fell...”

“Saying that's a bad omen, so knock it off. It's also poor manners.”

“But... There's nothing mystical about this mass of iron, right?”

In the end, Felmenia was reduced to tears. Magic was the

foundation of technology in her world, so her trust in it was profound. Knowing that she'd be flying in a metal tube without any mystical assistance... It was perfectly understandable why she and the other girls were so uneasy. Trusting in science wasn't second nature for them like it was the people of this world.

"You'll be fine. You can always use flight magicka in the event something happens, right?"

"Wha—?!"

There, the lightbulb came on for Felmenia. She looked as though that thought hadn't even crossed her mind—her first clumsy display in quite a while.

"Well, I mean... There's a lot we'd need to be worried about if we got thrown out of the plane, so yeah, I guess it's easy to overlook..." qualified Suimei.

"I was simply caught up in common sense!" protested Felmenia.

"Same goes for you, Liliana."

"I was careless... I will prepare myself... for the worst."

"That's not necessary. Hey, cut that out. Don't practice levitation here. It'll affect their instruments."

When admonished, Liliana—who was holding her arms out like wings—decided to trust in Suimei and turn over all responsibility to him.

"You're... right. So if something happens... you handle it, Suimei."

"We're in your care, Suimei-dono!"

"I can't fly, Suimei-kun, so I'll especially be counting on you."

"I'm telling you, you guys, it'll be fine..."

Suimei had a girl clinging to either arm from the seats beside him, and one reaching for him from the seat behind him. All three of them were staring at him with pleading eyes.

"Alright, fine, I get it. I'll do something if it happens... Not that I think it will, but if it does, I'll be counting on you too, Mary."

Suimei tossed a look behind him and found Hydemary staring back at him in discontent.

"You're not going to save me too?"

"Huh? I mean, you'd be fine without me, right?"

"That's true, but you know..."

"So no big deal, right?"

"Hmph..."

Hydemary suddenly puffed out her cheeks and turned away in a

huff. It seemed Suimei had touched a nerve. He was sure she would have been offended if he'd offered to help her out when he knew good and well that she didn't need it, but she seemed just as displeased that he hadn't. Suimei wasn't quite sure what to make of this.

In any event, once the otherworldly visitors had experienced their first flight, surely the return trip would be no obstacle. The remaining hurdles in the meantime would be takeoff, landing, and any turbulence that might crop up between them.

As Suimei was pondering all this, Hydemary started poking the back of his head.

"Hey, Suimei-kun, I just remembered... What about that thing from before?"

"What thing?"

"The letter from the Thousand Nights Association. You got more details from Akitsuki-san, right?"

"Ooh, that... Let's talk about it later."

"What's wrong with now? We've got a whole twelve hours to go, you know?"

"Well, that's true."

Just as Suimei was about to brush off Hydemary's suggestion...

"Welcome aboard flight number—"

Their conversation was interrupted by the flight attendant's voice coming over the speakers. Hearing it, the still-tense Felmenia suddenly jumped up in her seat.

"A-A voice! There's a voice coming from out of nowhere!"

"It's just the pre-flight announcement. Make sure your seatbelt is properly fastened."

"The captain for your flight today is—"

"I see... It's almost time. O Goddess Alshuna, grant me your compassion and blessing."

"Stop praying. And drop that tone. You sound like you're about to reach enlightenment."

"Suimei, penguins... can't fly... you know?"

"A stuffed toy can't fly anyway!"

The visitors from another world were all clamoring and squealing right up until takeoff, leaving the burden of calming them down once they were in the air to fall squarely on Suimei.



About thirteen hours after Suimei's group departed Japan, their plane arrived at Frankfurt am Main Airport without incident. The ones most relieved by their safe arrival in Germany were, of course, Felmenia, Liliana, and Lefille. They were unable to shake the strange floating sensation they'd experienced aboard the plane, so it went without saying that they were overwhelmed with joy to finally have their feet on the ground again.

Upon leaving the airport, the group boarded a taxi to make their way to the Society's headquarters. The taxi took a secret underground tunnel with Suimei and Hydemary's guidance, and they soon found themselves somewhere in the Harz Mountains before an enormous castle known as Alto Schloss.

The dense, surrounding forest here was always shrouded in white mist. It exuded a chill almost like a warning: danger would befall those who carelessly entered here. In that sense, the forest and mountains served as a natural barrier, ripe with both offensive potential and illusions of all manners. Neither ordinary folk nor magicians could enter here without invitation.

Suimei and his four companions were currently walking down a stone pathway, pulling their luggage behind them like tourists. They came to a stop in front of an enormous latticed gate with a black sheen to it that made it clear this was the end of the road for most. Felmenia looked particularly interested upon seeing it.

"This building resembles ones from our world, doesn't it?" she muttered admiringly.

"The architectural style... is similar to the Empire's... in a lot of ways. How mysterious," Liliana agreed.

"You're right. Well, the evolution of humanity has a tendency to converge, so the same is probably true of aesthetics," Suimei explained.

"Is that really how that works?" Hydemary asked dubiously.

"Yup."

Suimei brushed off Hydemary's doubts and casually approached the gate. However, upon realizing that there weren't many footsteps following him, he turned around. His three visitors were hesitating for some reason.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Are you serious, Suimei-kun? Do you not see the problem here...?" asked Lefille in astonishment.

"Suimei-dono! Are we really entering such a building?!"

Felmenia asked with even more panic in her voice.

“There’s a preposterous... number of spells... on it,” Liliana echoed.

“Yeah, but I’m telling you it’s fine. It poses no threat as long as we follow procedure,” Suimei explained.

And with that, he raised the palm of his hand and waved it about. The forest barrier started up discreetly, while the castle’s barrier started up most obviously—a decisive way to pressure anyone standing before the castle.

Enclosure, liberation, extraplanar... The barrier was a combination of every known type of barrier to thwart any would-be trespassers. Alto Schloss might easily be the most secure building in the entire world. Even if one were to break through all of its defenses, what awaited them inside was the most distinguished monster in the world.

“Open.”

Hydemary invoked her magicka, and the gate rose accordingly. The sound of heavy metal chains grinding resounded through the air, and before long, the entrance was completely open.

After confirming this, Suimei twirled around on the spot, the coattails of his black jacket fluttering behind him. He then took a theatrical bow like a butler.

“Welcome to the castle of our esteemed leader, Magicka King Nettesheim. As a magician of the Society, I cordially invite you all to enter.”



Suimei had a strikingly different air about him than usual, leaving his three visitors rather taken aback. When he stood up and impishly stuck out his tongue, however, everything seemed back to normal.

After that, everyone followed Suimei into the enormous castle. The front door opened the same way the gate did and revealed a rather serene entryway. It had a grand chandelier, a red carpet, and a double staircase—everything one would expect from the entrance of a luxurious castle. It was almost scrupulously maintained compared to the well-worn exterior of the compound.

There were several Society magicians scattered about inside and, upon spotting Suimei, each and every one of them looked stunned. This was the first time he'd shown his face at headquarters since disappearing without a word six months ago. His colleagues were rightfully shocked to see him, but the tension only lasted for a moment.

Suimei's fellow magicians didn't fail to greet him with a light bow after their initial surprise. Such deference had nothing to do with age; both those older and younger than Suimei met him with proper decorum. Suimei returned the gesture in kind, greeting his close colleagues casually and his seniors with respect.

As Suimei saw to his greetings, the girls behind him began whispering to each other.

"Mary-dono, is Suimei-dono someone important here?"

"You didn't know...? Well, Suimei-kun *is* a bit of a special case."

"Um, Hydemary? Could it be... we ended up... becoming disciples... of someone outrageous?"

"You sure did. I mean, he's special enough to take on a genius disciple like me."

It wasn't clear if Hydemary was praising Suimei or boasting about herself. She was simply—apparently—the kind of person who used herself as a metric for everything.

Suimei, however, eventually picked up on all the whispering behind him.

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

Or so Hydemary said, but the girls' faces said otherwise. Felmenia wore a questionable smile, Lefille looked somewhat

proud, and Liliana was cowering slightly, seemingly feeling out of place.

“There aren’t many people wearing robes or carrying staffs here...” Felmenia observed.

“We’re all more of the suit type. Also, modern magicka doesn’t fuss over requiring a staff,” Suimei responded.

“Incidentally, speaking of... I heard that you registered at the guild in layman’s clothes. Is that true, Suimei-dono?”

“Erk! How do you know that, Menia?!”

“Oh, that? He also apparently got into a quarrel while I wasn’t there,” Lefille interjected.

“Ooh, what’s this about?” Hydemary asked.

“Suimei-kun essentially started a fight.”

“As careless as ever, even in another world, I see...”

As the group walked towards the reception desk, Suimei spotted someone familiar who greeted him before he could say anything himself.

“Yo. Still alive, I see.”

“Well met, Lord Ozfield. My apologies for being out of touch.”

A good-looking Englishman in his late twenties casually waved to Suimei. He had asymmetrically parted blond hair and a rather sturdy build. His amber eyes appeared golden in the light, making for quite a wild impression whenever he glared at someone. He was presently dressed in a white vest and a black dress shirt, accentuated with a scarf dangling from his shoulders. All in all, he looked more like a young mafia boss than a magician.

But in truth, Alfred Ozfield—nicknamed Beatorex—was Suimei’s senior Enforcer. He was part of the Society’s martial faction who had taken down many mystical criminals. In terms of pure combat ability, Alfred was in contention for the title strongest among the Society’s younger members.

“So what kinda trouble did you get yourself into this time, Suimei? Even that ass Wiegel was complaining that you up and vanished.”

“I mean, I was only missing from this world for a bit.”

““From this world”? The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Sorry, but I’ll explain after I report to the leader.”

“Oh? You haven’t seen him yet? No time to be talking to me then, huh?”

At 190 centimeters tall, Alfred towered over Suimei... making it

quite easy for him to bop Suimei on the head. Suimei simply shrugged off the impact as Alfred flashed a friendly smile. Once he was done with Suimei, however, Alfred turned his attention to the three visitors. He greeted them courteously, even going so far as to remove his hat like a proper gentleman.

“Welcome to our castle, ladies.”

His figure as he did so was naturally handsome. It would have made for a nice painting. He was such a master at this, in fact, that it completely overshadowed the mischievous side of him that he’d just put on display with Suimei. Suimei didn’t hold a candle to him in that regard.

Once Felmenia and the other visitors returned Alfred’s greeting, Hydemary raised her voice.

“And what about me, Lord Ozfield?”

“You don’t really care, right, princess?”

“How mean.”

Alfred turned his back on the grumbling Hydemary before vanishing into the shadows of the castle with a wave of his hand. After watching him go, Lefille drew closer to Suimei.

“Is he something like your senior here?” she asked.

“Well, something like that, yeah. He worked me hard when I became an Enforcer,” he replied.

“He does seem strong.”

“I’m pretty sure even you wouldn’t be able to beat him in a fight, Lefi.”

“Is that so? Magicka would be rather ineffective against Lefille, so I would think she’d come out on top in close combat,” Felmenia interjected.

“No... That guy’s a major threat even without magicka. Seriously.”

Suimei lowered his shoulders, spread his feet, and raised his fists in demonstration. Alfred’s forte, you see, was boxing. He was quite obsessed with it, and had become the kind of monster who could knock out a heavyweight with a single punch. If he were to make a professional debut, he would easily become the kind of legend that the boxing world would still be talking about generations from now. He was simply that strong, even without all of his magicka. *That* was the true nature of the Society’s martial faction.

Suimei, however, put Alfred out of his mind as he waved to the

woman behind the receptionist's desk. She bowed deeply in response.

"It has been quite some time, Master Suimei. I'm relieved to see you well."

"Hello, Beltria-san. I've brought some guests with me. Could you take care of the formalities?"

"Would you like to use the parlor?"

"No, I don't think so. We shouldn't be long, so a sofa will do just fine."

"Understood. Also, I have a delivery for you from the Thousand Nights Association."

"Another one...?"

"If I'm not mistaken, a message was also sent to your branch. Is that correct? This is a little unusual for the Thousand Nights Association... I wonder what curious turn of events has inspired it."

"I have an idea. Anyway, I'll get started on it as soon as I've... What?! It's happening in Germany?!"

Suimei was glancing over the letter he'd pulled from the envelope as he chatted with the receptionist, but had an unexpected outburst on the spot. He could hardly believe that the target was trying to pull something in Germany, where multiple magickal organizations were based.

"I thought they'd eventually send materials with more details... But seriously, those damn geezers from the Thousand Nights... They really dared to leave this out until now?"

Hydemark's ears perked up upon hearing Suimei's angry mumbling. She had a pretty good read on the situation from that alone and decided to ask him for details.

"That same case? The fact that they've largely identified where it's happening means it's some sort of large-scale ritual, right?"

"Well... Something like that."

"Hey, are you still not going to tell me about it?"

"Just hang on a little longer, okay?"

Suimei brushed Hydemark off with a vague reply and looked over the map and photos that had come with the letter. The marked location was in central Germany, and the photos showed a forest and an abandoned town.

"Anyways, Beltria-san, please take care of them."

After confirming things with the receptionist, Suimei escorted his three guests over to a sofa.

“Okay, I’m off for a bit. Sorry, but you’ll have to wait here until I’m done. It shouldn’t take that long.”

“Take your time. I’m here, so we’ll be fine if anyone comes to talk to us.”

With that, Hydemary looked around at the magicians who were stealing glances at the group from across the lobby.

“This doesn’t really seem like the kind of place where outsiders are very welcome, though...” Lefille remarked skeptically.

“Really? I’m sure everyone is just dying to talk to you,” Hydemary retorted.

“Hey, it’s fine to talk and all, but don’t go blabbing about everything before I finish talking with the leader,” Suimei chimed in.

“Are you talking to them?” Hydemary asked, turning to Suimei.

“I’m talking to you,” he replied frankly.

“What? Do you think my tongue is that loose?”

“You love bragging, don’t you? ‘I’m a genius! A genius, I tell you!’”

“Mrgh...”

Hydemary glared at Suimei for a moment, then turned away in a huff.

“Hmph!”

“What? This again? What’s been with you lately?”

“Nothing!”

Suimei let out a troubled sigh as Hydemary suddenly raised her voice. Exchanging insults was basically an everyday occurrence with her. She would start something, Suimei would quip back, and she would retaliate by cynically poking fun at him. It wasn’t exactly a healthy relationship, but her refusal to play along lately told Suimei that something was wrong.

As he was pondering how he’d pander to Hydemary to get her to change her tune later, Liliana looked over to him with her violet eye.

“Suimei, are you going to be okay...?”

“Me? Sure. That magicka circle is basically a gate to another world. As for explaining what’s happened...”

It would be troublesome, but Suimei wasn’t really anxious about it.

“That’s not a problem. The leader’s fundamental doctrine is to wish happiness upon everyone. He won’t do anything weird just

from hearing my story. His dream is to see all the people of the world happy. That's why he founded the Society, after all."

"All the people of the world?" Lefille asked sheepishly.

"That's right," Suimei answered with a confident nod before looking up at the ceiling and declaiming that familiar mantra.

"Those under the weight of tears, remember. In this world, there is no rain of sorrow that cannot be cleared away. Those who carry anguish, remember. In this world, there is no blaze of pain that cannot be extinguished."

They were words Suimei, and even Lishbaum, had recited before. They spoke to the core of the Society's ideals: there was no despair without end in this world, for all who lived in it could know the hope of a new day. They were a tool to censure those with evil intentions.

"*That* is what we believe."

"Then the reason we're really here..."

"Right. If not for him..."

If not for the Society's leader, neither Suimei nor his beloved father would have ever become the magicians they were meant to be... Meaning Suimei never would have been able to save the girls he'd brought here today safe and sound.



Candlelight danced within a room of four stone walls. It reached into the darkness, but didn't reveal the entire room. Yet mysteriously there was no other source of light here, as if the dim orange glow was all that was needed.

There was no exit or entrance to the room, nor were there any windows. Only four walls. It couldn't even be called a tomb. It was just an isolated space. And yet there was a stylish table placed in its center with a single candlestick sitting atop it.

How exactly had it gotten there? More importantly, how had the two men who sat on either side of it gotten there? One of them was Yakagi Suimei, and the other was the lord of the castle.

The latter sat across from Suimei, illuminated by the dim candlelight. He had long hair and wore an Inverness coat. He had smooth skin and gave off a youthful impression, despite his stark white hair. He could easily be mistaken for a youngster, but his wise, cheerful smile gave him the impression of a good-natured old

man.

Indeed, this was the Society's founder and leader: Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, a great magician who'd carved his name in the history of magicka. But despite his great prestige and many titles, he smiled at Suimei with a jovial, lenient look.

"Hahaha! Even *I* never expected you to straight-up disappear from the world entirely."

Nettesheim didn't give off the slightest hint of severity in his demeanor. On the contrary, he happily chatted with Suimei as if this were no more than idle gossip. Suimei, on the other hand, replied with a slight air of tension about him.

"Meaning you knew I'd truly gone missing?"

"You're one of my children. You didn't think I'd look for you?"

Nettesheim saw the magicians of the Society as his own children. Man, woman, young or old... It didn't matter; they were all his children. The only exceptions were his brethren: two compatriots from the same era from which he hailed.

In any event, the news that Nettesheim had gone searching for Suimei troubled him. As such, he bowed his head apologetically.

"I'm truly sorry for all the trouble I caused."

"It's fine, it's fine. It was an act of god this time, right? There's no need for you to apologize."

"But regardless, even if divinity was involved, getting caught in the invocation of someone else's magicka is unbecoming of a high grand class magician. As such, the responsibility for my failures on this occasion should—"

"Mr. Suimei."

"Yes...?"

Nettesheim's voice resounded with such power that it allowed for no argument. Suimei raised his head upon suddenly hearing his name called, and was met with two pitch-black eyes staring right at him. But when Nettesheim saw Suimei's face, he smiled gently at him.

"I'm just glad you're alright."

"I don't deserve such consideration..."

Suimei bowed deeply at the leader's kind words. This was the kind of magician he truly was. He was superlatively tolerant, accepting of anyone and everyone. It was this facet of him, though entirely unsuitable for a magician, that attracted people to him. It was, no doubt, how the Society had come to exist on such a prolific

scale.

But in a sudden turn, Nettesheim flashed an innocent smile once more.

“Anyways, I’d like to hear more about what happened to you. In a sense, this could be good news for us, even if it was an act of god. Right?”

Nettesheim seemed to be referring to the teleportation between worlds. Suimei had indirectly referenced it in his letter, but had yet to give a detailed explanation. Nettesheim was curious and urging him to tell him more about it, just like a child with a new toy.

So from there, Suimei explained what had happened. About how he was teleported to another world, about how they used a system of magicka there that made use of the spirits called Elements, about how he’d fought against beings called demons that were created by an evil god... Everything. And once he was finished with his grand tale, he realized Nettesheim was quietly stifling a laugh.

“Pfft, heh heh...”

“What?”

Nettesheim’s smile was a cheerful one... but one Suimei had never seen before. His smile usually had a sense of innocence to it, but the smile on his face now had an eerie quality to it characteristic of those steeped in the mysteries. Unwittingly frightened, Suimei gulped. At this, Nettesheim stopped laughing.

“So we’ve made progress. It’s been hundreds of years of nothing, but here we finally have something.”

“You mean to say this could lead to a development?”

“Indeed, I do. Mr. Suimei, you truly are amusing. Mr. Kazamitsu was too, but you’re truly extraordinary.”

“Does the existence of another world bring us closer to accomplishing our goal?”

“I do wonder about that, but at the very least, some hope has come into sight. Either way, this means another dimension exists.”

The Society’s ideals placed a lot of emphasis on the parallel worlds mentioned in the Akashic Records and the possibilities that they could bring into being. If parallel worlds existed, then so too did infinite possibilities. Somewhere in the universe, there was a world where every single person could be saved... And that hope alone was enough to deny absolute misfortune.

No one likes a bad ending; everyone would prefer to see things

come to a neat, happy end... especially when it involves your own life or the lives of the ones you love. To that end, we all strive for the best we can achieve. And should the existence of parallel worlds be proven, misfortune could no longer be written off as fate. There would be a place in the universe for everyone, meaning there wasn't a single soul that couldn't be saved. The Society was a gathering of like-minded magicians who sought exactly that in defiance of all other bad endings.

"Also, I'm curious about those demons you mentioned. Are they anything like the ones that come up in fantasy novels?"

Nettesheim was indeed curious about the demons of the other world, but Suimei shook his head in reply.

"No, they're basically only called demons out of convenience. In truth, they're a different race created by an evil god. They look like a mishmash of beasts and insects, and their sinister existence serves no purpose other than evil."

"Sinister existence, huh? I picture something a little murkier when I hear that..."

Nettesheim was likely reminded of beings like the Astaroth that had appeared when Suimei saved Liliana; beings that inspired psychological revulsion. Suimei tried picturing the same thing in his own mind, but he really couldn't imagine what the leader had seen for himself. Nevertheless, there was something he understood implicitly from this little exchange.

"If the sinister threat you just imagined were to truly run wild, I believe it would spell the immediate end of the world."

"How scary, huh?"

Nettesheim's reaction was far too casual. Suimei narrowed his gaze suspiciously, wondering if he was fazed at all... Not that there was likely anything in the world that could truly frighten Nettesheim to begin with. But as Suimei beheld him dubiously, Nettesheim flashed an impish smile.

"Say, Mr. Suimei, how about using that teleportation circle you created to send a whole buncha magicians over there and really mess things up?"

"What are you even talking about? You have nothing to gain by doing so, right?"

Suimei was getting a headache from Nettesheim's suddenly joking attitude.

"Hmm? So you're not gonna get agitated over that, huh?"

"I mean, you don't have any actual interest in the magicka circle or the other world itself, right?"

"Essentially. What I'm interested in is the existence of another world—nothing more."

Nettesheim's answer was pretty much what Suimei had expected. There was no way this man, who wished for the happiness of all people, would really do such a thing.

"Is there anything else you need?" Nettesheim asked in a slightly more serious tone.

"Just one thing. I'd like to ask you about Lord Gottfried," Suimei replied.

There, Nettesheim stared back at Suimei in wonder.

"Now there's a name I haven't heard in some time... Are you referring to the same Gottfried I'm thinking of?"

"The very one."

"What about him?"

"I met him in the other world."

"Now that I think of it, he also suddenly disappeared without a trace. I see... So that's what happened."

Nettesheim quickly unraveled the mystery behind his sudden disappearance, looking fully convinced of the answer he'd arrived at.

"You say you met him, but from the sound of it, that's not all there was to it, right?"

"That's right. Lord Gottfried is planning something over there, and he's standing in our way."

"Hmm, I see. Then you're in for a fight."

Nettesheim cut to the heart of the matter, and Suimei gave an affirmative nod. He didn't need to say much more when Nettesheim had already anticipated what he needed.

"First thing's first, you can't fight properly over there, can you?"

"No... I can't."

Suimei was surprised for a moment, but only for a moment considering who he was talking to. There was no way the man known as the Magicka King couldn't predict something related to mystical laws. But now that he was finally getting to the crux of his visit, Suimei took on the attitude of a proper disciple and sat up straight.

"The reason for my visit today was to apologize for my

prolonged absence from the Society and to get permission to return to the other world once more. It was also to ask for guidance so that I can confront the threats that await me there, including Lord Gottfried.”

“I understand. There was nothing that could’ve been done about your summoning, given the interference from a higher power. I also understand that you have to go back to settle things. Indeed...”

“Then...”

Suimei’s expression lightened up upon hearing what sounded like a favorable response. However, guidance for proceeding down the path of magicka wasn’t so easy going.

“I’ll have some books regarding *Ars Combinatoria* prepared for you. Take those and research them. As for the power to fight... It’s no fun simply having the answer handed to you, is it?”

It was perfectly natural for magicians to unveil any mysteries on their own, so it virtually went without saying that there would be no easy answers for Suimei. The fact that Nettesheim was willing to prepare books for him meant that they would be dense grimoires that would require intense study to reveal their secrets. But as for advice when it came to fighting in another world...

“I’ll give you a hint. Let’s see... Take a look at Cross Dimension, summoning, and barrier magicka.”

Hearing this, Suimei raised a brow.

“Cross Dimension...? You mean his magicka?”

“Yup. It’s because of that that he was easily able to establish himself as a magician even in this other world, right?”

Cross Dimension was the magicka that the man in the demon army, Lishbaum—or rather, the Greed of Ten, Kudrack the Ghosthide—specialized in. He was able to use Phase Severance at full power in the other world despite it being a spell crafted in this one, meaning he wasn’t restricted despite being a magician there.

And based on Nettesheim’s hint, there was some answer behind the combination of Cross Dimension, summoning, and barrier spells. Was it magicka that made use of all of them? Or perhaps something that utilized components of each one?

“It’s not something you need to think so hard about, you know? What you’re really tripping over is the fact that the magicka of this world doesn’t work the way you want it to over there.”

“Yes.”

“So...” Nettesheim paused briefly before cutting to the heart of the matter. “You just have to make over there... over here.”

“...?”

Suimei couldn't digest that on the spot and grimaced, at which Nettesheim chuckled.

“Mr. Suimei, the theory is very simple. It's just that one substitution.”

“The simpler the theory, the more complicated the technique...”

“Yup. That's how it goes.”

Nettesheim gave a grandiose nod. He'd likely already decoded the real answer for himself, so all that was left for him was to poke fun at his slow disciple. He really had a good personality.

“That's all the hints you'll be getting for me. Figure out the rest on your own.”

“Understood. Thank you very much for your guidance.”

Suimei bowed once more, and Nettesheim suddenly rose to his feet.

“Mr. Suimei... We also make use of and borrow powers from higher existences. That's because their powers are tremendous... and tremendously useful.”

“Right.”

“I'm sure that goddess's power is the same. However, we acquired power to overcome such irrationality... Power that you possess.”

“What are you...?”

Nettesheim's advice took a sudden, unexpected turn. Rather than the evil god, Gottfried, or even Kudrack, Nettesheim spoke of an enemy that Suimei seemed to have overlooked...

“Well, just hear me out.”

Nettesheim's pitch-black eyes suddenly zeroed in on Suimei. They were eerily dark, like the bottomless darkness of space. They felt like they could suck you right in...

And the moment Suimei was entranced by them, they took on a complete change. They were instantly filled with bright passion and spirit. It was thanks to them that Suimei was able to recall something important. They were like a strong pat on the back, pushing him forward... No, like a force pushing all of the Society forward.

To definitively save those who can't be saved.

“Go. For the sake of proving your ideals. That will prove that

we're correct. Go beat the crap out of all divinity out there that only moves according to its own selfish desires."

"Right."

Encouraged by the leader's heartening words, Suimei left the enclosed room behind.



Meanwhile, in the Society's lobby...

"About Master Suimei?" the receptionist parroted.

After being asked to wait in the lobby, Felmenia and the other girls had decided to ask the receptionist, Beltria Krantz, about Suimei.

"Yes. We don't, um, know all that much about Suimei-dono."

There, Beltria flashed a graceful smile at the girls.

"Well, considering how old he is, did you never think that maybe he was just some young man?"

"It's true that Suimei-kun is young. However, after coming here and seeing the way he's treated, plus the fact that he was able to meet directly with the head of this organization... That isn't something just anyone could do, right?"

"You're right about that. Master Suimei's position allows him to freely meet with our leader. Actually, there's a premise here that one must be able to find our leader before meeting him, so magicians incapable of doing so cannot meet with him at all."

Felmenia cocked her head to the side at such a cryptic notion.

"Is he not here in this castle?"

"I think he is... But I don't know where. I've looked around for him myself, you know? I have enough interest in magicka that I've personally explored this castle. Yet, even though I searched every nook and cranny, I couldn't find him at all... Anyway, Master Suimei's current position is in part thanks to his abilities and his repeated contributions to the Society, but his pedigree is also quite storied."

"That is to say he gets favorable treatment for it?"

"It'd be more appropriate to say that people recognize the superiority of his lineage."

Upon hearing what Beltria had to say, Felmenia and the others recalled what had first impressed them upon teleporting to Japan: Suimei's house was larger and occupied more land than the

surrounding houses. At the very least, there was no mistaking that he possessed considerable assets.

“His pedigree, huh? It’s true that his house was rather large...”

“So he’s really from a longstanding lineage?”

“Yes. His lineage dates back over three hundred years before the founding of the Society, about a thousand years ago—”

“A-A-A-A-A thousand years?! Did you say *a thousand years*?!”

Felmenia jumped up from her seat in shock upon hearing such staggering information. From her perspective, a lineage of a thousand years easily surpassed that of Nelferia’s and Saadias’s oldest families, and perhaps even Astel’s royal line. As such, Lefille and Liliana were equally flabbergasted, their eyes like saucers. The only one who didn’t seem surprised at all was the lone resident of this world, Hydemary.

“In the Society, which is categorized as an emergent organization in the world of magicka, his lineage is pretty much the cream of the crop. I’ve heard that the popular systems of magicka at the time in Japan were Shintoism, mountain worship, and Buddhism. Master Suimei’s family is distinguished even among the distinguished families of the Orient, and the head of the family at the time showed interest in the Society’s ideals. So, after some rather involved correspondence, I’ve heard he ended coming over here and joining up. He was apparently quite compatible with Kabbalah numerology at the time.”

At that, Felmenia raised an eyebrow.

“I-I’ve heard that many of the mysteries here are involved with religion, though?”

There were many systems of magicka that used religion as a source, meaning that mastering multiple systems often involved several religious beliefs colliding. That could make it difficult to master other forms of magicka after steeping oneself in a single system. It could slam a magician into an insurmountable wall, preventing them from learning any other systems at all.

“Master Suimei’s family was apparently very focused on scholarly pursuits, and only weakly involved with religion. They seemed to have established methods of communicating with divinity regardless of religion, so they apparently never really prayed or anything to begin with.”

“Oh?”

Lefille perked up with great interest once the topic shifted to

religion, but Beltria shook her head.

“My apologies, but to go any further delves into the secret arts of the Yakagi family... Do you happen to know about it, Mary-chan?”

“He hasn’t taught me anything about it either, you know? I think he was about to, but then all this happened.”

“I see, I see.”

As Beltria and Hydemary continued to chat, Lefille turned to Felmenia.

“Lady Felmenia, do you understand what they’re talking about? I don’t really comprehend how one can borrow power from divinity despite spurning faith.”

“Vaguely. I believe what they’re doing isn’t bringing themselves closer to divinity through religious faith, but rather creating a means of bringing divinity to them with a vessel for it to manifest in, providing them a means of borrowing power.”

“In short... it’s somewhat like... a summoning, then?” Liliana piped up, joining the conversation.

Felmenia gave her an uncertain nod.

“Yes. For an easy to understand example, think of the half-possession of guardian angels.”

“But... how is that... advantageous for divinity? The traditional means... demand faith. But this way... the offering isn’t clear.”

“I think that, though incomplete, the point of being able to interfere directly with the world by means of possession is the very reason divinity lends a hand. To take it to an extreme, what divinity fears the most in the world is being forgotten. And those who can wield the power of a specific divine being are few and far between in terms of the entire world, as they’re restricted to a certain faith. That makes people capable of wielding multiple connections, like Suimei-dono, quite convenient for divinity.”

“So he’s... being used.”

Liliana had a rather harsh take on the situation. Suimei would have firmly protested if he’d been present.

“What about the less easy to understand example, Lady Felmenia?”

“I haven’t a clue. The process involves opening a connection, and then maintaining both the line of communication and the very means of communication itself. It’s all a mystery to me. You’ve seen Suimei-dono use Abreq ad Habra before, right, Lefille?”

“That’s... certainly true.”

Felmenia was referencing the spell Suimei used when summoning a guardian angel. Lefille had personally seen it in action twice. It was a technique that brought forth a preposterous existence, but not even Lefille, a half-spirit, had any idea what it was.

It was here that Beltria rejoined their conversation with additional information.

“Japan back in those days was polytheistic, so Yakagi family magicka has incorporated multiple systems since long ago. When it came to making use of the targets of their belief, they apparently did some pretty ridiculous and violent things. Master Suimei may in fact be the best in the entire Society at handling anything related to divinity. That’s precisely why he was even capable of driving an evil god out of—”

“A-An evil god?!”

“Yes. It’s quite a famous story, you know? One of the magicians known as the Greed of Ten summoned an evil god to destroy the world. But, in the middle of its manifestation, Master Suimei expelled it to the astral plane and reduced it back to a conceptual existence.”

The three visitors were at a complete loss for words. Suimei had repelled an evil god... meaning he’d already conquered what they were trying to fight in their own world.

It was there that Felmenia raised a question with a somewhat obtuse look on her face.

“So... was my summoning actually really a huge success?”

“No, Lady Felmenia, you failed. Don’t run from reality.”

Lefille put her hand on Felmenia’s shoulder, while Liliana standing next to them made a sullen face.

“Suimei... really is... a big liar.”

“Seriously. Where does he get off saying he’s lower-middle class? Isn’t he, like, the upper crust of the upper crust?”

“Ah, did Master Suimei say something like that?”

“That does sound like Suimei-kun, yeah.”

“He’s not really one to brag, after all.”

“In Suimei-kun’s case, considering the things he’s done, just talking about himself objectively would be boasting.”

As Hydemary and Beltria continued to chat...

“Um, excuse me...”

Someone called out to the group from behind. Judging by the suit they were wearing, it was clear they were a magician.

“Is something the matter?”

“Um, you there with the red hair... Could I shake your hand?”

Before they knew it, a fair number of magicians had gathered around them. Or, specifically, around Lefille.



Suimei returned from the leader’s room to find an enormous crowd in the lobby.

“Wh-What the hell is going on here...?”

Those were his first words upon seeing the bizarre situation. The lobby was in an absolute uproar. There was the clamoring din of excited voices, and at the center of it all, Suimei could hear a few familiar ones shouting things like, “Hold them back!” Indeed, it seemed Hydemary and the other girls were being swarmed by Society magicians for some reason.

As Suimei stood there observing this completely stupefied, one particular voice in the crowd screamed at him...

“Suimei-kun! You’re late! ‘It shouldn’t take that long’?! Liar! Idiot! Moron!”

It was an angry Hydemary, who liberally and childishly chewed him out. The Society magicians had her and the girls so desperately surrounded that she’d resorted to using magicka.

She had deployed one of her specialty spells, the card soldiers, defensively around the group. An entire deck of cards—jokers excluded—was frantically trying to hold off the magicians swarming around them. The human-sized cards, which had grown limbs, had basically formed a partitioning wall. But even with their help, Hydemary was still short on hands. More magicians were now trying to close in from a different angle, so she deployed another spell.

“Jetzt kommen, mein niedlicher Teddybär.”

[Now come, my cute teddy bear.]

With a poof typical of stage magic, a teddy bear wearing a pointed hat appeared out of thin air. It was only about the size of a soccer ball to start, but growing larger and larger with every blink of the eye.

“T-Teddy bear?! Crap!”

“Defensive walls! Hurry!”

“I-I-It’s getting bigger!”

“WAAAAAH!”

The magicians charging in from the flank were crushed by Hydemary’s teddy bear and left crying in agony as they were scolded for trying to cut in line. Meanwhile, the actual line itself didn’t seem much affected.

“Wait, a line...?”

Indeed, there was a line. A bona fide queue. Taking a closer look, Suimei could see a long line of magicians leading up to Lefille, who was sitting there with a complicated look on her face. Felmenia stood beside her, seemingly on guard duty as magicians approached her one after the other.

“H-Hair! Please give me your hair! J-Just a single strand will do!”

“C-Could you please pour your power into this crystal ball?!”

“Alright! I’m never washing this hand again!”

“Mistress! Please be my mistress!”

“Oh jeez...”

All Suimei could do was groan in bewilderment over the crowd’s clamoring about how this advanced research by several decades.

The frenetic energy of the scene made it look like some sort of celebrity meet-and-greet. The magicians—though they seemed more like rabid fans of the mysteries—were all screaming and shrieking in excited joy like fans swarming around their favorite idol. Suimei couldn’t help imagining the scene that way as he watched the chaos unfold.

But as he pondered that mental image, someone suddenly called out to him.

“Yakagi-san!”

It was a familiar voice that belonged to a friend of Hydemary’s. She was a Japanese girl around Suimei’s age with long, flaxen hair. She wore a white shirt, black vest, red tie, and a tight black skirt. It was a simple enough outfit, but it was put together in a showy fashion with dress gloves, a choker, embroidery, and other flashy details. Her face was also quite fair and sweet—two words that fit her like a glove.

“Oh, hey, Hatsuhana.”

Hatsuhana was a Society-affiliated magician whose day job was

stage magic. She worked as something like a mix between an idol and a magician in Japan. Suimei called her by the stage name, Hatsuhana Tenki, that countless people knew her by. She was famous enough that her autographs ran for tens of thousands of yen. In spite of her fame, she always took a respectful attitude with Suimei... but she was clearly agitated right now.

“Don’t just ‘oh, hey’ me! What’s going on here?!” she shouted near frantically.

“Don’t ask me,” Suimei replied noncommittally. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I called Hime-chan here. We can’t handle this on our own,” explained Hydemary.

“Mary-chan’s familiar suddenly came to me, and this is what I get for coming! Hey, you there! Don’t cut in line! I’ll burn you!”

Hatsuhana’s blazing eyes flared with a red glow as she made a rather violent threat. She specialized in fire magicka and was an expert in undodgeable attacks. Her magicka could rival even the draconic eye.

“Ooh! Combustion magicka!”

“Burn me!”

With that, idiots began crawling out of the woodwork and Hatsuhana dealt with them accordingly. But as word of the spectacles at hand somehow began spreading, even more magicians were swarming in. At this rate, the situation at hand could easily spiral out of control.

Sensing that headache coming on, Suimei walked over to Lefille. Even though she was just comfortably sitting in a chair, she looked exhausted. Her dim eyes were like those of a dead fish. But perhaps that was only expected considering the bizarre situation she’d been thrust into.

“Hey, uh, Lefille...”

“Suimei-kun... What’s going on here? Why am I being treated like this?”

“Do you even need to ask? It’s ‘cause you’re a spirit.”

“I never thought it’d be this bad...”

Lefille had heard it more than once now, but spirits no longer existed in this world. They’d all left, and because of that, a massive number of magicians coveted data on them. Furthermore, Lefille wasn’t just any spirit; she was half spirit, half human. Such a rare specimen would be difficult to find even searching all the way back

to the age of gods.

So, in spite of the chaos, things could have turned out much worse. If Lefille had gone to any other organization, she might have been detained for all kinds of cruel experimentation against her will. The people of the Society were unusually upstanding in that regard, given the organization's ideals.

Nevertheless, as Suimei stepped to the forefront of the crowd, the gathered magicians turned their focus on him.

"Is this girl someone you brought here, Master Suimei?!"

"Lord Yakagi! It's unfair to monopolize such a goldmine of mysteries and keep it all to yourself!"

"Master! Are your house specialties not Kabbalah magicka, divine communication, and regulation?! When did you begin studying spiritualism, séances, and spirits?!"

"Collaborative research! I propose we do some collaborative research! I'll personally fund the budget!"

"Aah, damn it! Shut up! All of you, calm down!"

Suimei found all the clamoring too much to bear and blew up at his fellow magicians. But alas, they were magicians first and foremost. It would take more than just getting yelled at for them to pass up a research opportunity like this

"Like we could possibly calm down!"

"Yeah! There's no way I'm getting any sleep tonight!"

"Aaaaah! Mistress!"

The swarm of excited magicians showed no signs of relenting, but Suimei was on a schedule. There was no way he was going to let his colleagues slow him down today.

"You all hear me?! We've got places to go, so knock it off already! I'm begging you! What we have ahead of us is going to be exhausting enough as it is!"

"What?! Where are you going?!"

"You've got something exhausting to go do?!"

"Boo to monopolies! Boooooo!"

The swarming magicians began conspiring together, surrounding Suimei in unified protest. They were also looking at Felmenia and the others with prying eyes, curious as to what exactly it was that they were getting up to next.

"I'm telling you, I've gotta get going! I have to go see that monster of a mystery geek!"

"Erk!"

“Oooh...”

That single phrase had the magicians pulling back like a wave. Their reaction was so extreme that the anxieties of Suimei’s visitors suddenly peaked. The first who dared to ask was Lefille.

“What’s with their reaction...? I’m starting to get really worried.”

“I’m worried too, damn it.”

“Suimei-dono? Where exactly are we going?”

“We’re getting someone to look at Liliana’s eye.”

Liliana’s shoulders jolted upon hearing that. The magicians all shifted their attention to her, and Suimei nodded solemnly. When he did, his colleagues’ gazes all became sympathetic at the same time. Even Liliana noticed it.

“I’m... really... really... worried.”

“It’s alright. Don’t worry. It’ll be fine. Probably... Maybe...”

In the end, Suimei was unable to reassure her with confidence.



After breaking through the siege of magicians, Suimei and the girls somehow or other managed to escape the lobby. Once they were free, Suimei led them to a certain laboratory within the castle. They went through a completely meaningless hidden door in the western wing of Alto Schloss and headed down a set of stairs to the basement where they found an old-fashioned wooden door. Just beyond it lay the lab belonging to a magister class magician who was one of the oldest members of the Society.

Suimei referred to him as the monster professor, but he wasn’t the only one who thought that way. Almost every Society magician called him a monster. But the moniker wasn’t for his hideous looks. Rather, it was because he was a mad scientist who liked to surprise people and play pranks on them. It had earned him quite a reputation.

The only reason Suimei was voluntarily coming to see him was precisely what he’d said in the lobby: to help Liliana. Suimei had personally managed to calm down her demonized eye to an extent using spiritual treatment, but he couldn’t heal it completely.

That was why Suimei had decided to bring Liliana to a specialist. He’d mentioned the so-called professor to Felmenia and the other girls a few times back in their world. But while the

professor's skills were second to none, just as the reaction of the magicians in the lobby implied... There was still plenty to be concerned about.

Suimei stood in front of the wooden door and used the ouroboros-shaped knocker. A man's voice quickly responded from within...

"Oohooohoo! Come right in, dearies!"

It left the visitors from another world with knitted brows.

And practically as soon as they stepped inside, the professor—a Western man with a plump build, bowl cut, glasses, lab coat, and a defining wart on his face—demonstrated immense interest in Lefille. He took on a triumphant pose with both fists in the air.

"TELESMAAAAAAAAA! My stars, dearie me! No magician could possibly hide their excitement over this!"

Right after yelling that, the monster professor started chasing Lefille around while wriggling his fingers about... After several minutes of this, it wasn't clear if he was listening to Suimei talk or if he was exclusively focused on chasing Lefille. Lefille couldn't even lose the professor by turning into a red gale—his strangely agile movements belied his plump body.

"Sensational! Splendiferous! What a superbly stupendous ability! More! I need to know more! I must study this moooooore!"

"Y-You pervert! Stop moving your hands in such a lecherous way first!"

"But I'm super, duper, ultra interested in you! I want you to be my test subject! Just for a bit! Just a teensy-weensy, little, tiny bit—by my standards, of course!"

"Never!"

"No need to be so shy, dearie-lou! I have a great reputation for being gentle, if I do say so myself!"

"Like I could trust that information coming from you!"

Lefille was screaming in protest, but the professor looked as determined as he did enthusiastic. Their little game of incomprehensible tag through the room filled with tanks and test tubes looked like it would go on forever... So Suimei took the cue to finally step in and put a stop to things.

"Professor... Could you please stop joking around already?"

"This is no joke, dearie boy! I'm as super serious as I always seriously am!"

"This is sort of beneath you, right, Professor? So, please, listen

to what I have to say instead.”

Or so Suimei pleaded, but the professor’s interest hadn’t abated in the least.

“Now, now, now! Not so fast, Suimei-kun! She’s a living, breathing spirit! She’s half human, half spirit, and 100 percent the stuff that fantabulous dreams are made of!”

“Yeah, but... I’d really like to get down to business, if you don’t mind.”

Suimei started to get irritated, and the monster professor took on an exaggerated fighting stance in response.

“Then it’s on!”

“Argh, damn it all! What’s on?!”

“A match, of course! With magicka, dear boy! If you win, I’ll consider maybe getting ready to potentially listen to what you have to say! But the odds are a big fat noodly zero for you, so do your best, I say!”

“I don’t even have the tiniest chance?!”

That much was obvious. They were in entirely different leagues as magicians. The professor was well over ten times Suimei’s age, and experience meant strength to a magician. There were devastatingly few things Suimei stood a chance of beating him at.

Both Felmenia and Liliana were stunned into silence by the professor’s bizarre behavior. After watching him chase Lefille around in circles, they were absolutely slack-jawed at his dizzying roller coaster of activity as he moved on to teasing Suimei.

As for Suimei, he was left panting through ragged breaths without having moved an inch. But once the professor had had his fun with Suimei, he turned his attention to the other two girls.

“It’s about time for introductions, methinks. I’m the proprietor of this here underground laboratory. Everyone here at the Society calls me ‘master’ or ‘professor’ or so on and so forth.”

“A-A pleasure to meet you. My name is Felmenia.”

“I’m... Liliana. Nice... to meet you.”

“...”

Even after Felmenia and Liliana introduced themselves, Lefille kept on her guard.

“No need to be so scary-wary of me, red-haired missy. As Suimei-kun said, that was just a teensy joke. We were just having a bit of fun.”

“Really...?”

“No, don’t listen to him, Lefi. This monster will get you to lower your guard, and then immediately make you regret it.”

“Oooh, Suimei-kun! You’re spoiling the fun, dearie boy!”

Suimei stood defensively in front of Lefille, and Hydemary nodded in admiring approval.

“Now that’s Suimei-kun for you. Solid advice from a constant victim.”

“If you think so, why don’t you save me?”

“Nope. Impossible.”

His disciple’s heartless response was just the same as it ever was in this situation. But Suimei was used to it by now, and thus turned to face the professor once more.

“So, Professor...”

“Oh, I know, dearie boy. You’re absolutely, positively, most definitely here about this little girlie’s eye. And oh me, oh my... You’ve had such a hard time, haven’t you?”

Before anyone knew it, the professor was right next to Liliana stroking her head. Nobody had seen him move. Not even the wary Liliana had noticed in time to react.

“You can tell...?” she asked, looking up at the professor.

“Why yes, dearie-lou. The only reason little Suimei-kun ever comes to see me is to say hi or to ask me for something... And, of course, when I play teensy-weensy pranky-yankies on him.”

“I have to say, it’s usually the latter.”

“But of course, of course it is! Anyhoosies, your little eye is the only possible reason for his visit todaisy-waisy.”

The professor had readily identified the reason for Suimei’s visit, but in truth this came as no surprise. The insight of a seasoned magician was simply that uncanny.

“Well, can you do it, Professor?”

“What nonsense are you asking, Suimei-kun? The word ‘impossible’ isn’t in my dictionary! And get this—if you act now, I’ll throw in the power to shoot mana beams from your eye!”

“What?! No! No add-ons! This ain’t a dealership!”

“No can do, my boy. My policy is to put 110 percent into absolutely, positively everything. So eye beams and hand drills it is! Ooh, and caterpillar track legs! Only the greatest upgrades! Oh, but it’s so hard to discard the idea of weapons themed after tools...”

Dangerous idea after dangerous idea kept flying from the professor’s mouth. It was no longer clear that he was actually

listening to anyone. And once all this began to set in, Felmenia looked quite worried.

“Um, Suimei-dono... Will Lily really be alright?”

“She’ll be fine. Just... Yeah, no. She’ll be fine.”

“What does... that mean?”

Liliana looked more worried than anyone—and royally confused. Suimei couldn’t say much more than that. The professor was indeed superlatively serious when he put his mind to it, but his present behavior made that incredibly difficult to believe.

“Okay, let’s get this done in a spiffy jiffy! Don’t worry! It won’t even take an hour!”

“What about an examination? I brought the diagnosis I wrote up.”

“Oh, tut. There’s no need for that. I’ve already done my examination and we can proceed at once.”

The professor said he’d done his examination, but Suimei hadn’t noticed him do anything of the sort. His skill really was far beyond understanding, or at least beyond the understanding of someone on Suimei’s level.

“Liliana, did he do anything to you?”

“I didn’t... sense anything.”

“Just who do you think I am, dearies? My glasses and lab coat and haircut aren’t just for show, you know!”

“None of those really have anything to do with this, right? Can’t you at least brag about your career and your abilities as a magician?”

“No way, no how! That’s sooo boorish! Oh, but goodness me! I almost forgot. I do want to grade your examination, Suimei-kun, so just leave your diagnosis somewhere on that table over there. ‘Kay?”

Suimei followed the professor’s instructions and placed the notes he’d taken while treating Liliana atop a pile of assorted papers and pens on the table. It was such a mess that it gnawed at Suimei’s urge to tidy up, but he couldn’t deny there was such a thing as an organized mess... In the end, he refrained from touching anything.

“Okay, this way, Miss Gothy-Eyepatch & Twintails.”

“Please don’t... say things... like Suimei did... when we first met.”

“Well, how rude of me. That puts me on Suimei-kun’s level. How horrid. Anytoodle-loo, just step into that room right over

there.”

“What room...?”

The professor pointed to the wall, where a door suddenly manifested. It was such a fishy phenomenon that it had even Suimei rubbing his brow.

“Don’t tell me you just made that room right now...”

“Well, of course I did!”

The professor acted as if that were only obvious, but it couldn’t have been more unclear. His giggling was just far too suspicious.

“Please take care of her, Professor.”

Suimei made sure to emphasize that part, but suddenly found Hydemary giving him some rather serious side-eye.

“My, how courteous of you. Quite a big difference from how you treat me.”

“What?”

She’d taken an abruptly thorny tone. And as Suimei turned to face her, she closed in rapidly.

“Isn’t it? You haven’t coached me at all lately, and you won’t even tell me about that enforcement request.”

“That’s... I’m sorry your coaching has stalled, but the request was addressed to me, you know?”

“So you can’t tell me about it? Even though you always make me help?”

“There’s a lot going on, okay? We’ll talk later, so just hang on until things have calmed down.”

“Really? This isn’t just an excuse to cut me out of the picture?”

“Why would I even— What’s gotten into you?”

Suimei found her behavior beyond strange, but she offered no explanation. She simply turned away in a huff.

“Hmph!”

“Hey...”

With that, it was clear she had nothing more to say to Suimei. Taking this as a sign that it might be time for them to step in, a concerned Felmenia and Lefille approached Hydemary.

“Um, Mary-dono?”

“Is something the matter?”

Yet for some reason, the one to answer their questions was the professor.

“No need to worry. Just a lovers’ quarrel, dearies.”

“It is not! Don’t go stirring crap up!”

Suimei snapped at the professor as he casually ushered Liliana to the other room. He really did enjoy teasing Suimei, and cackled all the way there. But, personal slights aside, this meant Liliana's operation would begin shortly. With that, the curse that she'd suffered all this time would finally be remedied... and Suimei was at last able to let out an irrepressible sigh of relief.



The day after visiting Society HQ, Suimei and the girls were walking through a train station in Frankfurt.

With Liliana's surgery out of the way, Suimei had wrapped up his business at Alto Schloss and stopped in for the night at a suite in a certain hotel in Frankfurt. After his visitors from another world watched him explain the benefits of tipping the porter with dubious eyes, next on the docket was heading out to fulfill another of Suimei's objectives in Germany.

Liliana's surgery—a cause for concern, however minor—had been a resounding success and she was already stable enough to be up and around. Normally that would be unthinkable the day after such a major operation... But that was just one of the perks of being treated by such a talented magician-cum-surgeon. It was essentially outpatient surgery. Liliana looked to be in perfectly good health, her steps so light that no one would have ever guessed she was in recovery.

Walking next to Suimei, Liliana lifted a hand to shield her gaze from the reflection of the sun beaming off the surrounding buildings. Taking note of this, Suimei turned to her curiously.

“How's your eye, Liliana?”

“Good. I don't... feel any problems.”

Her tone was the same as it ever was. Both mystically and physically, she appeared to be just fine. Her violet hair swayed behind her the same way it always did as she tottered along. And everyone who passed by the little girl in a gothic lolita dress beheld her lone visible eye with great interest.

That's right; her lone visible eye. Liliana was still wearing her eyepatch.

“Hey, can't you take that off now?”

“The professor said... I can't...”

“Hmm?”

Suimei raised a questioning eyebrow, and Liliana simply replied...

"Apparently... if I take this off... I would lose something called my eye-den-tee-tee."

"Your... identity? That damn monster of a professor... You've got a proper artificial eye in there, right?"

The artificial eye Suimei was referring to functioned like a perfectly normal eye. It was impossible to create such a superior prosthetic with modern-day medical technology as it was, but magicians and their supernatural techniques loved to give life to the supposedly impossible.

"Yes," Liliana replied with a nod. "The professor... apparently... implanted one. It actually works... pretty well."

Suimei was glad to hear that, but Liliana's vision wasn't the only thing he was worried about.

"Hey, Liliana. He didn't add any weird functions, did he?"

"He... did."

"Th-That damn monster..."

Suimei had reiterated that the professor was specifically not to include any extras, but his instructions had apparently gone unheeded. If the professor had done anything weird to Liliana, it was Suimei's duty as her guardian to protest.

"It's... okay. It's apparently something called... a mystic eye."

Those words caught Felmenia's interest.

"What manner of ability does it have, Lily?!"

"It performs actualization on sight... apparently."

"Actualization on... Uhhh..."

Felmenia couldn't wrap her head around it with only that much to go on, and stood there making an unusually blockheaded expression.

"Actualization on sight...? What? Like ghost sight?" Suimei muttered before looking to Hydemary, who was a treasure trove of knowledge.

"Judging from the nuance, it's probably something similar," she said with a shrug.

"Suimei, you know that the mages... back home... can't really see... spiritual beings... right?"

"Yeah, I know that much."

The other world had very concrete threats to mankind in the form of monsters and demons, so the idea of seeing more spiritual

existences was quite foreign to them. That was why they were so oblivious and vulnerable to dark magic and the shadow of the Astaroth.

However, with the right actualization, they would be able to see such beings for themselves... meaning that if one were to forcefully manifest in the present world, it would theoretically be easier to repulse it. It was a nearly ideal ability for Liliana, who was an easy target for such existences.

“So now you’re able to observe them? He sure put some thought into this...” Suimei muttered.

“Even though he’s usually all over the place...” Hydemary muttered in turn.

“Yeah. If only he could do something about that.”

Suimei and Hydemary agreed on that point, but in truth, the professor’s eccentricity was likely impossible to correct. He’d lived this way for nearly three hundred years, after all.

As Suimei pondered such thoughts, he glanced over at Hydemary when the conversation reached a lull. She was in quite a foul mood yesterday, but today she seemed back to normal. Perhaps she’d just been irritated after all the commotion in the lobby?

“What?” Hydemary asked upon noticing Suimei looking at her.

“Nothing,” he immediately replied.

“Oh?”

Suimei casually brushed off the fact that he had indeed been staring at her, and proceeded down the sidewalk leading away from the station. The group followed suit. After eventually getting far enough to see some landmarks, Lefille took a good look around.

“So, where are we headed?” she asked.

“The usual place, right?” Hydemary asked in turn.

“The usual?” Lefille inquired, one eyebrow raised.

“Yeah,” Suimei replied. “A shop we go to all the time. We’re going to buy some intel.”

Suimei’s goal today was to gather information. He needed more intelligence on the enforcement request that had been entrusted to him, and he knew exactly the broker to get it from. The vast majority of enforcement requests from the Thousand Nights Association contained the basic assignment and nothing more. The Enforcer entrusted with the job was expected to do the rest of the legwork themselves. That was just how short on hands the Association was.

“Come to think of it... It seems like they sent way more letters than usual this time,” mused Hydemary.

“Yeah, but we’re going for the bigger picture today,” Suimei countered.

“Going to an information broker to get more than the Association could officially provide just seems iffy.”

“That’s just how good this guy’s intel is.”

Eventually, the group arrived at a certain alleyway. The further in they went, the heavier the air felt. It was like moisture made of murky darkness was all around them. If a normal person were to wander this way, they would surely be assaulted by nausea and leave. That was just how sickening it felt.

And perhaps because the dank stench of it had begun to waft the group’s way, Lefille grimaced.

“That’s quite an awful smell...”

“It’s... a type of drug... to stimulate excitement... right?”

Liliana identified the effect of the smoke just by sniffing it. She’d likely acquired this manner of knowledge during her tenure as a spy in her home world. It was true that the patrons of the cannabis cafe tended to favor sativa strains, so Liliana was surprisingly on the mark. The stinging in the back of Suimei’s nose when he unwittingly breathed some of the smoke in told him that much.

“This way.”

Suimei beckoned the girls further into the alley, and the visitors from another world followed him warily. In contrast, Hydemary was rather blasé about the whole affair. She’d accompanied Suimei here several times already, so she was quite used to it and walked along as though this were nothing more than a casual stroll.

Lefille, however, suddenly lowered her voice as they proceeded down the alleyway.

“There’s quite a number of them...”

“Oh, you don’t need to mind them. None of them are dumb enough to do anything.”

The girls were keeping watch on the shadows lurking in the darkness, but Suimei bid them relax. After making it further down the alley still, a flickering neon sign like what you’d see in front of a nightclub came into view. It simply read, “Coffeshop.”

This manner of sign was borrowed from Germany’s neighboring country of Holland, where cannabis was often sold in such a

fashion. Control over it had been strengthened there, however, so such signs weren't as prolific as they used to be. Regardless, it was common knowledge in the rest of Europe what they really meant.

Control over the drug was even stricter in Germany, however, so this shop hypothetically shouldn't have existed in Frankfurt. The darkness of this particular alleyway, however, was darker than the pitch of a moonless night.

Suimei tossed a passing glance at the dark red mark which indicated that outsiders weren't welcome, and headed down the stairs to a wooden door emblazoned with the words "Jazz und Cannabis."

"Suimei-dono... I can't take any more..."

Overwhelmed, Felmenia suddenly pinched her nose and crouched down to the ground.

"You can't handle the smell?"

"My apologies. I don't feel well."

"Oh well... Sorry, Mary. Keep her company, will you?"

"That's fine and all... But you'd better tell me what you learn here later."

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

There, Hydemary turned and lent Felmenia a hand.

"My apologies. I shall prepare some manner of countermeasures for next time."

"Yeah, magicians are somewhat inseparable from herbs and narcotics, so you at least need to build up a tolerance for the smell."

The reason Felmenia couldn't handle it was probably because of the life she'd lived in her home world. She was both a noble lady and an elite of the royal palace. Considering that and the native system of magicka there, she'd likely never been exposed to such a drug. Perhaps that was part of the reason she'd fallen prey to Sebastian's herbal magic so easily.

Suimei saw Felmenia and Hydemary back up the stairs, then pulled himself together and returned to the entrance. After pushing in the slightly jammed door, he was greeted by Friedrich Silcher's "Die Lorelei." For some reason, their choice of music here ran bizarrely classical. The calming and drowsy piece felt utterly out of place.

The interior of the shop was lit with a warm glow, but the somber stone of the building made everything appear gray. There was resin stuck to the cracks in the stone ceilings and walls, which

really highlighted the age of the building.

There were customers here and there, some of which looked like they'd smoked all they could and were enraptured with eerie smiles, while others looked like they'd just started as they blew clouds of smoke from their lounge chairs. Meanwhile, the shop's owner was quietly polishing glasses behind the bar with a line of brand-name whiskeys on it.

"Oh? Well, if it ain't Starfall. You're still alive?" one of the customers called out to Suimei.

"Heya, boss. Spare us a fight today, will ya?" called another.

"Only if you lot stay docile."

Suimei replied to the customers in an irritated tone, at which they all broke into laughter.

"We'd just be asking for trouble if we act docile!"

"Hahahaha! Ain't that right?! Hahahaha!"

The customers all appeared to be quite excited. There were those with frightening features, those covered in tattoos, those covered in scars, and worse. The so-called coffee shop looked like nothing more than a den of villainy, yet not a single of its patrons looked down on Suimei. But that only stood to reason. The shady folks who gathered in such dens revered scholars of the mysteries. Those who incurred the wrath of a skilled magician and unwittingly met their fate in doing so were as numerous as the stars. If Suimei were to let his blazing eyes flare up here, the stoned customers would all be scared straight sober.

Ignoring the junkies for now, Suimei looked over at the owner, who in turn glanced to his side. This was a signal, ushering Suimei to the usual place. After heading further into the shop, he bumped into a familiar pair: a tall man wearing a robe and a young girl wearing a long cardigan.

"Erk..."

"It's you, Starfall!"

The moment Suimei entered her field of vision, the girl shouted out as though she'd just encountered an enemy. She had auburn hair tied up in an updo. At a glance, she looked Asian, but closer inspection called that into question. Her appearance simply gave off that strange impression. As for her companion, the tall man remained completely still and silent as if he knew nothing of the girl making a racket next to him. He simply glared over at Suimei's group with his blood red eyes.

"It's been a while, Reverend."

"Yeah."

Suimei greeted the tall man according to magicians' etiquette, to which the man gave a brief reply. And, in complete contrast to his taciturn nature, his female companion continued making a fuss.

"I heard you vanished off the face of the earth all of a sudden. Something about you being unable to bear the Society's teasing anymore and running away."

"No one's teasing me, and that's got nothing to do with you."

"Hmph. I see you haven't changed at all. You could tell me anyway, you know?"

"I have no intention of playing nice with you."

As Suimei coldly shut her down, the tall man grabbed the girl's cardigan.

"Let's go, Leo. Our business here is done."

"Huh? Hang on! You're gonna rip it! My sweater! You're stretching my sweater!"

The tall man then grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and dragged her away. As they walked off, Lefille knit her brows.

"Were they acquaintances of yours? Both of them seemed beyond the ordinary."

"Well, yeah. They're dangerous. The reverend is probably among the best of the best when it comes to magicians."

"So that was..."

Lefille turned around to take another look, but the pair had mysteriously vanished. There was no sign the door had opened.

After that and a bit more walking, Suimei at last found the person he was looking for sitting in the back of the store—a young-looking man wearing a long fur coat. He had ragged, uneven teeth like those of a devil right out of a novel, and an abnormally wide mouth to go along with them. His eyes were shining with such a fiery blaze that they could easily be seen through his colored sunglasses. At a glance, he didn't appear human at all.

He was currently smoking a joint, kicked back in his chair with his feet crossed on the table like some delinquent. This was Wiegel, the information broker that Suimei had come all this way to see. He looked just like a devil, right down to his glowing eyes and pointy ears.

When he saw Suimei, Wiegel exhaled all the smoke in his lungs and raised a hand in a friendly manner.

"Hey there, boss. Thought it was about time for you to show up," he said, his joint still between his teeth.

"I bet you did," Suimei replied.

"So? Where'd your little vacation take you this time? Didn't think there was a resort in the world that I of all people didn't know about."

"You've got the right idea. It wasn't in this world."

Just saying that revived a bitter taste in Suimei's mouth. Wiegel stiffened up for an instant, then let out a grand sigh.

"Oh... So it finally happened? You walked a bit too far off that path and ended up becoming a disappointment, did you?"

"I haven't, damn it! I'm being serious!"

Suimei shouted at Wiegel, who flashed a teasing smile. He did seem to understand, however, that Suimei was in fact telling the truth. As such, his gaze wandered to the girls behind Suimei.

"So, what? Is that red-haired lady your proof?"

"I didn't exactly bring her along to prove anything."

With that casual reply, Suimei turned around to find Lefille narrowing her eyes. She was glaring right at Wiegel, laying bare the power of the spirits as if strengthening her already fortified guard even further.

"No need to glare like that. I'm not a bad guy, ya know?"

"But you are a villain, no?"

"Heh heh heh..."

Seeing Lefille's hostility ease somewhat, Wiegel gave her an eerie smile.

"Didn't bring the doll princess with you today, hmm?" he asked, finally looking back at Suimei.

"I'm having her wait outside for now," he replied.

"Oh? You keeping your cute little assistant out of this?"

"Not really."

"Don't be that way, boss. She fell into quite a panic when you left her behind, ya know? She was flying all over the place and even dropped by here a number of times."

"Yeah, I know. She's been awfully pouty lately because of it..."

"You said it yourself, man. The doll princess is being pouty 'cause you were mean to her. You reap what you sow, you know?"

"I was mean...? I'm pretty sure I've been treating her the same way I always do."

"Yeah, slinging insults at each other, right? Women actually

like it when you're nice to them, ya know?"

"But Hydemary's..."

"It's 'cause you're like that that people can tell you're a virgin. I bet you haven't laid a hand on any of these cuties either, right?"

"Hey, uncalled for! Can you quit calling me that every god damn chance you get?!"

Wiegel usually went out of his way to bring it up when he talked to Suimei, but seemingly having had his fun, he now lowered his gaze to Liliana.

"Hey there, little lady, didja eat something bad? You've got some weird things floating around you, ya know?"

Wiegel seemed to be able to perceive the malice that still lingered around Liliana, though that came as no surprise.

"Something... really bad."

"I was like that back in the day myself. How nostalgic."

"That so? Actually, how'd you end up back to normal after that?"

"In my case, all I had to do was eat the poison whole. The stronger the poison, the stronger I become. I simply overcame it."

"Hahh... That's useless as a reference."

"Heh heh heh, Kazamitsu said the same thing."

There, Wiegel took another puff on his joint. Liliana clapped her hand over her nose and mouth with a grimace, and Lefille stepped in front of her.

"So? What kinda troublesome crap didja get caught in this time?" Wiegel asked Suimei once more.

"Well, a whole lot," he replied bluntly.

And with that, he could feel the girls' gazes zero in on him from behind.

"What's up, you two?"

"I don't even know how many times this makes now..."

"Suimei... you're a walking... trouble factory."

Lefille and Liliana both took a stab at Suimei, but he was long used to his friends saying all kinds of things about him. He simply brushed off the insult and turned back to Wiegel.

"Actually, you wanna hear something funny?"

"Oh? You're acting awfully cool for being so serious. Tryna look good in front of the ladies?"

"Oh, shut up... Now, as I was saying, did you know Kudrack's still alive and kicking over in this other world?"

“What?! Hah! Now ain’t that something! Didn’t you have him on death’s door when he ate your lightning and got blown away beyond the phase? But he’s still alive, huh? That ass really is past redemption.”

“Seriously. He’s even gone and grown fucking horns. The hell is he doing? It’s beyond poor taste.”

“Hahaha! Now that’s Kudrack for ya! He become a devil or something?”

There, Wiegel let out a hearty laugh. This topic struck quite a chord with him. But when his fit of laughter subsided, he narrowed his gaze as he looked to Suimei once more.

“So? You finish him off properly this time?”

“Not yet.”

“Figures. That bastard can’t be done in by ordinary means. Granted, me or Kazamitsu could still kill him in an instant.”

“That so?”

“If it weren’t, there’s no way he would’ve waited for Kazamitsu to kick the bucket before making his move, right? He’s fundamentally a wuss.”

“A wuss, huh...?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I don’t mean he’s scared of dying, but he’s probably pissing his pants at the thought that he can’t save people. He’s got a full-blown messiah complex by nature.”

“What? Isn’t that something different?”

“Hey, boss, you’re gonna go bald if you worry your noggin nitpicking stupid crap like that all the time, ya know? And a bald virgin really won’t have a chance.”

“Every... single... god... damn... time...”

Wiegel clearly hadn’t changed in the six months Suimei had been gone. Suimei did his best not to blow a gasket and managed to keep his cool as Wiegel cut to the chase.

“So, what do you need today? Pretty sure you’re not here just to gossip about that asshole.”

“Hmph. Maybe I just came by to say hi.”

“Like hell you did. The day you drop in to say hi is the day the world ends!”

And as Wiegel loudly barked that...

“Crap! Oh crap!”

“Yakagi’s about to blow up the world!”

“Mommy, save me! I’m gonna get killed by a virgin!”

“Shut your damn traps and go smoke yourselves stupid, you fucking junkies!”

The other customers in the shop roared with laughter as they made fun of Suimei. He threatened them briefly before turning back to Wiegel. He then pulled a package out of his bag and placed it on the table.

“First is this,” Suimei declared.

“That’s...” Liliana nearly gasped.

“Hmm... That an eyeball?” Wiegel asked, peering at it more closely.

“S-Suimei-kun, is that maybe Lily’s...?” Lefille asked in turn.

“Oh? It’s the little lady’s? You sure brought me something nice, didn’t ya?”

Wiegel inspected the article with keen interest. Suimei pointed a cold gaze at him as he shoved his hand back into his bag.

“Don’t consider it a treat. I’m not here to please your stupid tastes. Here’s your fee. Take care of it.”

“Nice doing business with ya!”

Wiegel chuckled to himself as he took the stack of euros Suimei slid him. Liliana seemed rather uneasy about this whole exchange and looked up to Suimei nervously.

“What’s he going... to do with it?”

“He’s gonna eat it, along with everything left in it.”

Liliana and Lefille were both left speechless upon hearing this, but they were both people whose bodies had been steeped in the mysteries. They knew good and well there was more to it than that.

“You mean to say he’s disposing of the evil within, Suimei-kun?”

“That’s right. There are other ways to do it, but...”

Before Suimei could finish explaining, Wiegel cut in and took over.

“Listen up, ladies. What we call Astaroths are suuuper vindictive beings. They’re always looking for an opening to take you over. And when that happens... You follow? You know it wouldn’t be good, don’cha?”

“It’s like... you’re not even... alive.”

“Bingo. You’ve got it. Pretty much everyone who gets surgery done by that freak Nicolas comes right back to Frankfurt, ya know? Even he needs a whole lotta time to handle stuff like this.”

At this juncture, Suimei took back over.

“So it’s faster and more certain to dispose of it in this guy’s stomach. It’s so roiling with chaos in there that not even an Astaroth can stand it.”

There, Wiegel let out a bold laugh. His long, pointed tongue poked out between his uneven teeth so far that it looked like it could reach past his lower jaw. In any case, this made it quite clear to the girls what kind of man Wiegel was. He was far from human, long transformed into something absurd. It might even be safe to call him a devil at this point—that was the impression he gave off.

“But... eat it?”

“Literally. He’s gonna eat it. This guy can eat anything.”

He wasn’t picky about how filthy his food was. It didn’t matter if it was organic or inorganic. He could eat the table in front of him right down to the ashtray. If he felt like it, he could probably eat the entire shop.

And with that, Wiegel threw the rest of his joint into his mouth and swallowed it. Watching this, both Lefille and Liliana were left speechless once more. They realized just how serious Suimei was being when he said “anything.”

“Now, there’s something else I want to ask you about.”

“Try me. You want the real scoop on that enforcement request that got sent your way a while back?”

“Huh, so you already know...? Well?”

“Before that... You know I only take payment in advance, don’tcha?”

“Yeah, yeah. You never shut up about it.”

Even as Suimei complained about Wiegel’s greediness, he took another stack of euros from his bag and threw it on the table.

“Hah! Sure is nice having a golden goose.”

“Don’t call me a goose.”

“Oh, come on. Do you have any idea the meager stuff I’ve been living off of since you’ve been gone? I’ve even had to hold back on the wine with my meals.”

“It’s your money sense that’s the problem. I bet you only buy the stupid expensive stuff.”

“My wonderful tongue is ever so rich.”

“Bold talk for the world’s sloppiest eater.”

Suimei took a stab at Wiegel before narrowing his gaze.

“Whatever. So?”

“That info you got is right on the mark. It came from the

intelligence network of the supreme Thousand Nights Association. There's no need to doubt it."

"I see..."

That meant there weren't any holes in the information Suimei had received. It seemed almost as if the Thousand Nights Association had set this up just for him. Why had the target started moving as soon as he came to Germany? Why was Suimei given such complete information, even in piecemeal fashion? The details in the letters he'd received from Akitsuki and Beltria were practically begging him to take action. It was rare, even outright suspicious, for things to work out so perfectly.

"Oh, and here comes the doll princess now," Wiegel suddenly announced.

Suimei turned around upon hearing that and, sure enough, spotted Hydemary walking in. Felmenia wasn't with her.

"How's Menia doing?" Suimei asked.

"Well, she's calmed down a bit. I had her wait at the entrance to the alley. So?" Hydemary asked in turn.

"We're just about to get started."

"Indeed," Wiegel interjected. "All the details are written down here. Why don't you take it back to the hotel and read through it carefully, hmm?"

"You sure are prepared," quipped Suimei.

"This way's more convenient for you, right? I'm catering to you here. Cry and thank me for it."

"Who's gonna cry?"

Suimei coldly replied to Wiegel's patronizing attitude before taking a glance over the papers and putting them in his pocket. Hydemary then sidled up next to him.

"Hey, let me see too."

"Huh...? I'll show you later."

Suimei seemed reluctant to show Hydemary, who only leaned in closer. He couldn't tell what was up with her, but as he was wondering about exactly that, she raised an irritated voice.

"Why? Do you think I'm so worthless that I can't even help?"

She apparently took Suimei's reticence as a sign of distrust. Ordinarily, she'd just be complaining about how much of a pain the enforcement requests were, showing no interest or enthusiasm for the job at all. He had no idea what had been eating her since the other day. This behavior was odd, even for a fickle child.

“Well?!” she demanded.

“That’s not it,” Suimei replied. “That’s not it at all, but...”

He was troubled by Hydemary’s strange persistence on the matter. She was getting so worked up about it that she was raising her voice and losing her temper.

“So what is it then?! Aren’t you the one always saying that we need to share information to resolve things quickly?!”

“Hey, calm down. What’s with you? You’re never this eager about these things, right?”

“Not really...”

“Not really...?”

Hydemary turned away in a huff for the umpteenth time over the past few days. Suimei really couldn’t tell what had her so miffed. He was left completely befuddled. Even Lefille and Liliana seemed to be at a loss. Wiegel, however, unexpectedly raised a hand.

“Don’t sweat it, ladies. You could say this is karma biting him in the ass.”

“Karma? What are you talking about?”

“You’ll understand one day, virgin.”

“I told you to knock that off already!”

In any event, Suimei had now taken care of everything he’d come here for. He curtly informed Wiegel that he was leaving and turned on his heels.

“See ya, boss. If you run into Kudrack over there again, give him my regards. Tell him that everything valuable in the world gets put away in Wiegel the Festunger’s stomach.”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyways, I’ll drop by again before I leave.”

Suimei then headed for the exit, but quickly realized that Hydemary wasn’t following him.

“Mary?”

“...I’m coming.”

There was an unmistakable pause before she replied. Still pondering her strange behavior, Suimei left a tip at the bar before stepping outside. When he did, he suddenly felt an uncomfortable prickling on the back of his neck.

“...”

It wasn’t as bad as what he’d felt when Eanru showed up, or Kudrack for that matter. But nevertheless, it was an ill omen that only assailed him when something was about to happen.



As it turned out, Suimei's bad premonition was right on the mark. It happened early the next morning in the middle of everyone getting ready to check out of the hotel. Felmenia, who was staying in the room next to Suimei's, came knocking on his door in a panic.

"Suimei-dono, Suimei-dono! It's an emergency!"

Her exact words were muffled through the door, but based on her tone of voice alone, Suimei could tell something was wrong. And certainly something more serious than a rogue appliance.

As for Suimei, he'd finished putting together all the information he'd gathered the night before, and was planning to brief everyone on the enforcement request this morning. It went without saying this was a terrible omen.

Hoping deep down that it really was just something stupid, Suimei undid the chain on the door and opened it. Felmenia was standing just on the other side, still dressed in her pajamas and with her hair somewhat disheveled like it had been a few days ago.

"Menia? What's going on?"

"M-Mary-dono! Mary-dono has disappeared!"

"Hmm? Disappeared? She didn't just take a step outside or something?"

"No, that doesn't seem to be the case. I found this when I woke up..."

There, Felmenia held up a piece of paper.

"She left behind a note?" Suimei asked somewhat skeptically.

Felmenia nodded in a meek reply. Suimei then took the note and looked at it.

I'll resolve this case.

That was all it said. It was short and to the point, and as soon as Suimei read it, he dashed back into his room for the memo he'd gotten from Wiegel. He was certain he'd put it away in his desk drawer last night, but now it was missing.

"Tch! That idiot..."

"Suimei-dono, does this mean Mary-dono went out to do the job on her own?"

"I bet that's exactly what she did. She's not the type for elaborate pranks. She definitely went to do it on her fucking own."

Suimei let out a troubled sigh. He'd never thought Hydemary would charge off on her own like this, but the real question was why... Why had she done it? Suimei didn't understand.

"Um, is Mary-dono always like this?"

"No, this is a first. Whenever requests have come in before, she's acted like they weren't her problem. What's gotten into her...?"

"Did she perhaps read the contents of the request and sense impending danger?"

"If that's the case, then why did she sneak into my room in the first place? It doesn't add up."

Suimei was right; the order of operations was all wrong. He'd been evasive about the case to begin with, so Hydemary would've been completely in the dark *until* she snuck into his room to read the letters and the memo.

That meant, even if Felmenia was right, Hydemary had some other reason for sneaking into his room. And Suimei didn't have a clue what that might be. Moreover, if Felmenia *was* actually right and Hydemary had sensed impending crisis, it was more likely she would've slapped Suimei awake rather than running off alone.

But nevertheless, that's exactly what she'd gone and done. What on earth had prompted her to tackle this on her own?

"Um, Suimei-dono, what exactly was the request that was entrusted to you?"

"That's... The culprits are trying to summon and assimilate a god."

Unfamiliar with the phrase, Felmenia was left standing there with her head quizzically cocked to the side.

Chapter 4: The Way of a Genius

Hydemary Alzbayne was a homunculus. Unlike a regular human, she was created artificially by human hands. She was not born from the womb of a mother, but rather a large glass tube. She was nourished not by her mother's milk, but by the wisdom of her Lapis Philosophorum.

Her creator was an alchemist renowned in the world of *magicka*: the automaton maker Edgar Alzbayne. He was also known as the Doll Master, and it's said that the multitude of automata he'd created had played an active role at every turning point in history.

Hydemary was the Doll Master's self-proclaimed magnum opus. Like any normal homunculus, she lacked emotion, moved by her own will, and possessed an exceptional talent for *magicka*. But what truly set her apart was her ability to pull knowledge from the almighty catalyst known as the Lapis Philosophorum.

Hydemary was truly a genius among geniuses; there was no denying it. And precisely because of that, anything should have been possible for her. She was naturally unfettered by the worries and frustrations of most normal people, yet her heart had recently been shaken with great vexation. The cause for this? It was none other than the young man who had become her mentor, Yakagi Suimei.

Even though he always told her about incoming enforcement requests right away, he'd been unusually cagey this time and refused to share anything with her. It was as if he was saying that he didn't trust her. One thing then led to another, and before Hydemary knew it, she was sneaking into his hotel room to steal a glance at the coveted enforcement request.

And now she was atop a giant rabbit she'd pulled out of her toy box—one that was practically identical to a real rabbit—riding off to the target location to fulfill the job.

"Just casually leaving something so outrageous at large... What on earth was Suimei-kun thinking?" she muttered, doubtful and irritated.

Why would Suimei, of all people, neglect something so serious? We were talking about the summoning and assimilation of a god, after all.

Hydemary had once been involved in a divine incident with Suimei. Many magicians regarded the summoning of divinity as calamitous, and as such, attempts at such rituals were practically unheard of. It was unthinkable to simply stand back and let it happen. Yet even after seeing the request, Suimei had done nothing. He'd simply said it wasn't an emergency and gone about taking care of the girls he'd brought back from another world.

Hydemary certainly wasn't of a mind that the girls were unimportant. But in the grand scheme of things, the enforcement request took priority. In spite of that, Suimei hadn't lifted a finger. Hydemary had a building mountain of criticism for him.

"Suimei-kun, you dummy. You big, mean, stupid dummy..."

Suimei's magicka lessons with Hydemary had come to a grinding halt with his disappearance six months ago. That was bad enough, but he'd suddenly returned out of the blue with a gaggle of girls. And because he was spending all of his time with them, he continued to ignore Hydemary's lessons and even his own research. This further fanned the flames of her irritation.

"What does Suimei-kun think I am...?"

Hydemary knew good and well the girls all had their circumstances, so she couldn't be openly frustrated with them. But she was unhappy nevertheless. She was Suimei's disciple. His *first* disciple. How could he just ignore her? She should be getting most of his attention, yet he'd barely been paying her any mind. And when he did come to her, all he did was either ask her for something or treat her like a child.

"If this keeps up, he'll *always* think of me as a child... But if I settle this, even Suimei-kun will have no choice but to recognize me. I'm not a child..."

Little did Hydemary realize that her behavior, in a way, was indeed incredibly childish. This was essentially an inferiority complex born of her latent potential as a homunculus.

Homunculi were artificial beings created to prove that they could function every bit as properly as "the real thing," so to speak. Born of the perfected catalyst that could create even life—the Lapis Philosophorum—they were said to be well-versed in all the wisdom of the world and to provide their creators with sage advice. They

were highly sought-after in that regard.

They sat proudly at the top of the hierarchy of intelligent beings. They could not be further from inferiority in those terms. However, the source of a homunculus's wisdom was far different from the fruit born of actual experience.

Though homunculi possessed superior intellect, they were pure and innocently naive to the world. Other intellectuals envied their position. Their purity made them precious, and their innocence made them irreplaceable.

However, no matter how one dressed it up, homunculi were still fabricated geniuses. And it was impossible to truly appreciate wisdom that had not been gained through one's own experience.

This, you see, is what leads to an inferiority complex.



Once it was established that Hydemary was really gone, Suimei gathered the girls in his room after quickly getting dressed and ordering some breakfast via room service. Everyone sat as they pleased—on top of the bed, arms crossed over the back of a chair, on the sofa, and such—so that they were all facing each other.

Despite what it looked like, this wasn't a meeting to gripe about how there was only meat for breakfast. Indeed, the matter at hand was far more serious than that. Suimei was finally ready to discuss the enforcement request he'd been so reluctant to share thus far. After meeting with Wiegel, he at last had all the information he needed and was preparing to tell the girls about it anyway. But, thanks to Hydemary's disappearance, he no longer had a choice about speaking up.

"The summoning and assimilation of a god, was it?" Felmenia asked, repeating the words she'd heard from Suimei earlier.

"Yeah. There's not much to explain, though... It's exactly what it sounds like. The goal is to bring divinity into this world and unify with it. Really, it's an extension of a ritual that's pretty common in this world."

Seeking to unify with a god and integrate with the cosmos... It wasn't truly all that different from the goals of Neo-Puritanism. But the sheer fact that a summoning was taking place made this particular case far more direct and far more dangerous. There was no room for error or doubt.

Suimei gave a rundown of what was happening, but it didn't really seem to stick with his otherworldly visitors. Understandably so, of course. Mysticism in their world differed greatly from mysticism in the modern world. Here, magicka was a secondary benefit acquired in the pursuit of greater knowledge. But for the girls, learning magic had always been an end unto itself. The idea of assimilating a god was completely novel and foreign to them. What good was that? What did it do? Was that like eating a god? If so, was that even possible and would it taste good? They were simply that confused.

"Hmm, to put it in terms of your world... I got it. This is like trying to summon the Goddess Alshuna and become one with her."

When put into perspective, the gravity of the matter naturally set in. Panic was suddenly writ large across the faces of Suimei's otherworldly visitors.

"I-I-I-I-I-Is that not absolutely preposterous?!"

"Meaning... that your request... is to... stop that?"

Suimei nodded at Liliana, leaving Lefille with dubiously furrowed brows.

"Then why haven't you done anything about it, Suimei-kun? This is clearly far more important than tending to us. I can understand Lady Mary's impertinence."

Lefille now sympathized with the impatient Hydemary, but Suimei shook his head.

"Well, it's really not an emergency or anything."

"How so?"

"It doesn't seem the Thousand Nights Association cares much about how this goes down."

"What? Even though it's so serious?"

"First things first: Why is the ritual to unite with a god fundamentally something that must be stopped?"

"Now that you mention it... I suppose if the summoner isn't doing anything particularly bad, then there's no reason to stop them."

"Right? If they don't have any ill intent, then the ritual is essentially a grand experiment. They're not all that uncommon in this world. It's a good way to collect data on the success rate and other things, so it's not something that absolutely needs to be put a stop to." Suimei paused for a breath there before continuing, "In short, the Thousand Nights Association's mission is no different

from any individual magician—the pursuit of knowledge. They would choose the fruits of magicka over world peace should they be weighed on a scale against each other.”

“But they still supervise magicians, no?”

“They basically just act like police on paper for their own benefit. In truth, they’re a shady lot who’s willing to look the other way as long as things aren’t made public.”

“But they specifically sent you a request to stop this incident, right? Doesn’t that mean this Thousand Nights Association organization has apprehensions about it?”

“That’s true, but... Well, as proof that they really don’t care what happens, they’ve been monitoring the target quite closely this time. Look.”

There, Suimei handed Lefille several documents.

“This is...?”

“It’s a written report.”

“And these are... foto-giraffes, you called them?”

“Photographs, yes. This is all the information that’s been delivered to me so far, starting pretty much as soon as I returned to this world.”

Suimei then reviewed the rest of the documents with the girls, after which Liliana raised her hand.

“Suimei...”

“What is it?”

“It’s... strange. How is it... that you were kept updated... so frequently and conveniently?”

“That’s simple. The Thousand Nights Association leaked the fact that they sent out an enforcement request.”

“Huh? Why would they...?” a befuddled Felmenia interjected.

“To urge the target to hurry up with the ritual,” Suimei explained in brief before going into more detail. “Essentially, the Thousand Nights Association is trying to settle this case while I’m handling my own business. By leaking intel and speeding up the ritual, they’re trying to force my hand. They’ve orchestrated this to be an absolute pain in the ass for me.”

“That’s... quite precarious, no?”

“Isn’t it? But if I don’t show up at the site at all, it doesn’t matter if the ritual succeeds or fails. If it all goes to shit one way or another, they’ll be expecting me to clean up the mess anyway.”

The Thousand Nights Association placed a significant amount of

trust in Suimei's abilities. His reputation preceded him, and this was certainly child's play compared to subjugating a red dragon.

"Why you, Suimei-dono? There are other magicians, no?"

"I'm their only pawn that could decisively take care of this. I'm the so-called specialist."

"But... a pawn?"

"That doesn't sound very nice."

"Yeah, well, they have a reputation. Everyone knows what kind of authority they have, and everyone knows they can really throw it around. It's convenient, in a way."

With that much cleared up, Felmenia raised her hand with a question about a different detail.

"Suimei-dono, when you said someone's trying to summon a god... Do you mean a god that this world believes in?"

"Er, well, that's where things get complicated. It's probably a god they created themselves."

"Bwuh? A god... they created?"

"Think of a cult. When starting up a new religion, you have to make your own god, right? You know... What kind of god are they? What kind of blessing does one receive for earning their favor? That kinda thing."

Suimei paused there, flashing a rather empty smile.

"In truth, there are no real gods in this world."

"What?"

"Huh?"

"Let me clarify. When I say 'divinity,' I'm generally referring to a colorless power of high mystical grade from the astral plane. And, frankly, there's no way something like an omnipotent god exists there. Basically, humans are the ones that arbitrarily grant astral powers vessels and then stereotype them as gods and whatnot. That's what divinity really is."

Lefille in particular furrowed her brows over Suimei's explanation.

"If that's truly the case, wouldn't it mean Alshuna isn't a real goddess either?"

"That depends on your personal take on the matter. There are, of course, powers that can manifest of their own will. High-ranking spirits and devils, for example. By intervening directly with the world, they end up becoming a part of it. And as the world matures and faith in them accumulates, they're exalted into the status of

divinity. That's probably Alshuna's deal. Fundamentally, such beings aren't omnipotent, so whether or not you can call them gods really depends on your definition of a god."

"Mrgh..."

Lefille clearly had complex feelings on the subject of Alshuna's goddessship. But in broad terms, there were two kinds of godhood: the vast, omnipotent kind ascribed to the likes of the Judeo-Christian God, and the specific, role-based kind ascribed to the various gods of Eastern pantheons. The very fact that Alshuna and the Evil God were vying for control of a single game board proved they weren't the omnipotent kind.

"We've gotten a little off track here. The long and short of it is that these guys made up their own god, are summoning a colorless power from the astral plane, providing it a vessel of their own accord, and doing whatever they want with it without reporting to a supervisory authority."

"But... A god they made up, huh?"

"That's the scary part here. What kind of god they summon is up to them. We don't know exactly what'll show up. It might even be something powerful enough to destroy the world. The bigger the scale of the summoning spell and the more mana used as an offering, the closer the result will be to what they were hoping for. It's nothing to sneeze at."

"Suimei-dono, will it really be so easy? It would seem to me that this sort of thing would be quite difficult from a technical perspective."

"How exactly... is it done?"

"Step one is to find people with a lot of mana and really drill some faith into them. Faith in the existence of the god they're trying to summon, mind you. By doing that, even without a massive number of zealous believers, they'll at least be able to summon *something*. It's a ton of work and takes a ton of effort, but you can tell these people are committed based on the progress they've achieved since the enforcement request was leaked."

"But how do they drill faith in...? Oh!"

Felmenia clapped her hands together in exclamation, and Liliana gave voice to the answer she'd just realized.

"Drugs... right?"

"Right. By putting the people they've gathered into a deep trance, they can bring them close to a state of pure faith. Then,

once everything's in place, all that's left is the ritual."

Now that they'd finally covered all the technical details of the enforcement request, Lefille had a very different question for Suimei.

"I understand the situation, but why did you refuse to tell Lady Mary about this? You could have at least shared it with her little by little, right?"

She certainly had a point. Hydemary had misunderstood Suimei's silence as a lack of trust, so if he'd told her something—even a *little* something—things likely wouldn't have turned out this way. Nevertheless, Suimei had a good reason for keeping his mouth shut.

"I handled it this way because... the target's a homunculus."

"I see. Just like Lady Mary..."

"You mean to say you were worried that Mary-dono would sympathize with the target?"

"Oh, no. Not a chance. But no matter how you cut it, having to defeat someone so similar to yourself is a little... I wanted to keep a lid on things until I had all the intel, but that ended up biting me in the ass."

"Just like... with Reiji."

"No kidding. Seriously, why does it always end up like this when I'm trying to be considerate?"

Suimei let out a long, grumbling sigh. His plan had blatantly backfired on him, but nobody could blame him for it. There were indeed times it was difficult to decide whether or not to talk about something—especially times like these.

Now that he'd said his piece and the conversation seemed to wrap up, Suimei rose from his seat.

"My personal car should be getting here soon. Let's wait at the entrance."

Seeing the three girls nod, Suimei's thoughts turned to Hydemary.

I'll have to properly open up and have a talk with her next time...

With that, Suimei headed for the door.



After flying out of the hotel, Hydemary made her way to a certain abandoned town in a certain remote forest in Germany. The

clear sky turned cloudy along the way and an ominous wind was now blowing. It didn't quite look like the heavens would open at any minute, but there were definitely signs of rain to come.

"Doing a ritual out here really is in poor taste..."

There was the sour stink of mold in the air. The crumbling walls of the remaining buildings were barely holding together, and broken glass was scattered everywhere like caltrops. Yet despite its lack of charm, this was nearly the perfect place for a summoning ritual.

Coming out to such a remote location meant there were few consequences even if things got messy, and land out here was plentiful. Moreover, abandoned locations like this had a certain mysticism to them—slight though it was—that was empowered even further by the natural energies of this peculiar part of the world. Location-wise, it was the obvious choice; any magician would've picked here for their ritual.

Hydemary observed the ghost town from the cover of a tree. There appeared to be people roaming around with glazed-over looks on their faces. In all probability, they'd taken—willingly or otherwise—the strange blue pills that the Thousand Nights Association had sent Suimei a sample of.

The target of the enforcement request was trying to summon and assimilate a god. In order to do that, they were likely manipulating anyone they could find with mana, making use of their now-hazy consciousnesses to create faith in the god to be summoned. Meaning...

"There've gotta be bigger fish to fry around here."

Behind all of the glazed-over puppets were the people manipulating them. Cults were usually built around a leader that brainwashed their followers. But in truth, there was a limit to what a single person could do. Whoever was planning and staging the ritual likely had a number of trusted subordinates that were more than mere puppets.

And just as Hydemary suspected, she found a number of clear-eyed guards patrolling the perimeter of the ghost town and supervising the drugged members. They were all magicians, and their presence here indicated they were at least strong enough to participate in the ritual. Facing them all at once would be difficult, but nothing said Hydemary had to face them at all. If she could slip past them and take out their leader, this would all be over.

“And the big guy’s... over there.”

Her gaze fell upon a building with a steeple—exactly the place that came to mind on the subject of gods. It was the ideal setting for trying to call forth divinity, and of everywhere in town, it had the highest concentration of mysticism. It was the obvious choice for the ritual.

Hydemary slipped past the patrolling guards and stealthily entered the building. Its interior was decorated with old paintings and a crumbling statue of a saint on a cross. There was a musty, worn out red carpet and a series of splendrous ornamental pillars lining the sanctuary, with a small wooden confessional off to the side. All in all, it was a typical Catholic church.

Hydemary took a look up the altar steps where she thought the summoning ritual would be held, but to her surprise, there was no magicka circle.

“It’s not here...? But their defenses should have been thickest here...”

She was certain that this would be the place. It was the only logical choice. Any magician would have picked it, but there wasn’t a single sign any ritual preparations had been made at the altar. What was going on? Hydemary had gotten caught up in her own preconceptions, and just as she began to doubt them...

“Hmm. I thought it was about time for someone to come, but I never thought it’d be a homunculus.”

“I”

Hydemary quickly leaped back as if she’d been flicked away upon hearing a voice from on high. When she looked up at the ceiling, she spotted someone sitting atop one of the beams: a beautiful blond boy with a short bob. He appeared to be in his mid-teens, and his angelic looks made it seem as though he’d stepped out of one of the church’s paintings. The greatest irony of all, however, was the way he was dressed. In a white robe and stole, he looked as though he were here to celebrate God, not create an idol.

“You’re...”

“A pleasure to meet you, homunculus girl. Welcome to my church.”

The blond boy politely greeted Hydemary like a guest before she could even ask who he was. He was unflinching, but Hydemary kept a vigilant eye on him.

“You sound as if you’ve been waiting for me.”

"But of course. I've been anxious to receive you ever since I heard an Enforcer would be coming. I've been ever so eager to meet you."

"This is a trap..."

"Precisely. Though it's a little late to be realizing that. In any event, this is exactly what I should have expected from the Thousand Nights Association. They identified the most suspicious place right away and threw their protégé of a homunculus at the problem. Yes, yes, I should have expected all this. Of course a haphazard plan would be so transparent to an Enforcer."

The young boy, a homunculus himself, spoke in a somewhat disappointed tone, leaving Hydemary grinding her teeth. It was true that she'd carelessly stepped into his trap, but he mistakenly believed she was a sacrificial pawn.

"I'm not some puppet," she declared, quickly scanning the room for magickal traps. "I came here of my own will."

"Oh? Is that so? Even though you're a homunculus? No one ordered you to do this?"

"That's right."

"How admirable of you. And what, pray tell, urged you to come here?"

"That's none of your business."

"Hmm. It sounds to me as though you *were* ordered to come here then, homunculus girl."

"I don't know what you think of homunculi, but that's not how we're meant to be treated. Also, could you not refer to me as 'homunculus girl'? I have a proper name: Hydemary Alzbayne."

The boy's eyebrow twitched upon hearing this.

"A homunculus with a name, hmm? Was that the whimsy of your creator or something?"

"It's a matter of course to name the things you create. Humans give names to everything, don't they?"

"..."

There, the blond boy fell silent. The only answer he offered Hydemary was a dark stare.

"So? Where's your master?" she tried asking instead.

"Who knows? I wonder where he is now... I have no idea."

"Don't play dumb with me. Your master's probably the one who came up with this worthless plan, right? So, where are they? Making preparations for the summoning?"

Hydemary tried to rile the boy up, but he calmly shook his head.

“You’re quite wrong, I’m afraid. This is something I started.”

“You...? Ridiculous. That’s impossible.”

“Say what you will; it’s the truth.”

Or so the boy proclaimed, but Hydemary couldn’t believe it. It was mind-boggling to think a homunculus was independently responsible for this. Homunculi were treasure troves of knowledge; their wisdom would inherently have them think better of such a precarious plan. Moreover, there was no merit in a homunculus assimilating with divinity to obtain power.

“Why would a homunculus do something like this?”

“Whatever do you mean? It’s precisely because I am a homunculus.”

“...?”

Hydemary still wasn’t following. What about being a homunculus prompted him to do this? What did he mean? Was he just toying with her?

“Oh my. You truly don’t get it, do you? Just by accomplishing the summoning and assimilation of divinity—something that no one has ever truly done to completion before—I’ll be released from the homunculi’s dilemma.”

“The homunculi’s dilemma...?”

That concept wasn’t logged in Hydemary’s vast repository of knowledge, leaving her with knitted brows at its mention.

“What? You’re not familiar? I’m talking about the emptiness that all homunculi feel. We possess nothing of our own. All we have is knowledge. We are naive things, pantomiming wisdom. And with no experience to our names, even if we possess great knowledge... it leaves a hole in you rather than filling you up, doesn’t it?”

“That’s...”

It came as a surprise even to herself, but Hydemary hesitated to reply. She couldn’t. If she did, she feared that she would give voice to what she’d been trying to keep silent all this time. A strange sensation began clawing at her back. It seemed the boy had struck an unpleasant chord.

“Doesn’t it? And, in all likelihood, you came here because you hate that too, don’t you?”

The young boy paused for a moment, but didn’t wait for Hydemary’s reply.

“You came here all on your own to stop me. But isn’t that because you want some sort of accomplishment? Because you crave acknowledgment from someone?”

“Ugh!”

Hydemary scoffed, suddenly becoming self-conscious about why she was here. Why *was* she, exactly? Wasn’t it because she wanted a certain boy to admit just how capable she really was?

“Ahaha! See? I’m right! You’re no different from me! You acted on your own to try and accomplish something, yet you’ve fallen right into my trap!”

The boy sneered, laughing at Hydemary and her blunder. At this, she snapped.

“Don’t talk like you know me! I’m nothing like you! I’m my father’s magnum opus, the ultimate homunculus!” she screamed.

“The ultimate homunculus, huh? I don’t really care whether or not that’s true at this point, but I’m still right, aren’t I? This makes you the same as me. So tell me... Why are you trying to stop me?”

The blond boy suddenly began accumulating mana. When he did, Hydemary sensed the deployment of a spell. She’d gotten caught up in the heat of the moment and let her guard down.

“This is... barrier magicka?!”

A violet magicka circle swiftly spread out at her feet. The moment she noticed it, her vision warped like an image reflected in a marble. It was a spatial control spell. Violet manalight gradually encroached on everything around her as her body felt like it grew heavier and heavier.

“I have another question for you,” the boy said. “Where is the alchemist who created you right now?”

“M-My father isn’t here!”

“He’s not, is he? I knew it. You and I are the same. We’ve both been cast aside by our creators.”

“You’re wrong! I wasn’t cast aside!”

“Then why isn’t the alchemist who created you here? Don’t alchemists normally keep their homunculi by their side?”

That much was certainly true. But it was equally true that Hydemary hadn’t been abandoned. Her father, Edgar, had simply sent her to study at the Society for her own good.

“I was... I was sent out for training... For the sake of my own future... So...”

“That’s an excuse. Homunculi are complete upon creation. They

don't *have* futures. That 'father' of yours simply sent you away because he didn't need you anymore."

"You're wrong! It was for my sake!"

"Really? Where is the value in such pursuits for the likes of us?"

"That's..."

The blond boy's question echoed mercilessly in Hydemary's head. Where was the value...? It had been years since Hydemary was born, and she'd accomplished nothing. Where was the value in her to begin with?

Hydemary's vision began melting like iron in a smelting furnace, and her consciousness began slipping with it. But even as everything faded, that scornful voice rattled in her head.



Following shortly behind Hydemary by car, Suimei and the other girls arrived at the remote forest. Celtic culture remained quite prominent in this region of Europe, and forests were viewed as sacred—especially here in Germany where they were often protected. They were frequently the setting of famous fairy tales like "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Hansel and Gretel."

Many of Germany's forests had been dramatically reduced in size for development, but to the north lay the Reinhardswald, to the west lay Teutoburg Forest, and in the central region lay both Thuringian Forest and Schwarzwald, famously known as the Black Forest. Some of its great woodlands were still well and thriving to this day.

One such forest spread out before Suimei like a gently undulating wave. The trees were beautiful and verdant, giving the scenery a strong sylvan aesthetic. There were small paths here and there winding through the greenery, dotted with cottages made of plaster-white walls and vivid orange roofs in the clearings and dales. Far up atop a mountain, Suimei could even see what looked like a fortress.

It would have made for wonderful sightseeing on a clear day, but Suimei and the girls were here on much more serious business. Suimei made a small window with his fingers like he was casually deciding the angle for a sketch and peeked through it at the ghost town in the thick of the forest. There was a sporadic gathering of people—all dressed like the ghosts of said ghost town—meandering

mindlessly with unsteady steps. It looked like they were being corralled for some kind of sermon. After getting an eyeful, Suimei slid back down the oak tree he'd been observing things from, where Lefille was waiting for him.

"Suimei-kun, how does it look?"

"Yeah, this is the spot alright. Looks like they don't have too many guys on guard, though."

"Is that so...? How strange."

Lefille was quite puzzled by the minimal security. However, this was actually quite common with magicians. Fewer guards often meant there was something else in store.

Felmenia, Lefille, and Liliana stepped forward, ready for action. Suimei, however, stepped back.

"Aah, sorry. You three go ahead. I've got a little work to do here."

"Work?" Felmenia asked.

"Look," Suimei replied, putting a hand to his chin. "There's a barrier cast around the area, see?"

Felmenia looked and saw something like a heat haze and a carved seal that indicated the edge of the barrier.

"We've already passed the barrier meant to keep people out... So what purpose does this one serve?" she asked.

"Rather than keeping intruders out, this one is meant to regulate the scale of the spell when they summon their god. It's to make sure they don't absorb too much of nature's power, and it doubles as a sort of cage for whatever they bring into this world," Suimei explained.

"H-How big is this barrier?"

"It's pretty big. It covers the entire region."

"And you're... going to break it?"

"That's right. The normal process for dealing with situations like these is to work from the outer moat and break things down all the way to the inner citadel... but that idiot shirked checking for traps and just snuck right in."

Hydemary had most likely panicked when she learned the subject of the ritual, the state of its progression, and its overall scale. For the sake of expediency, she would have targeted the ritual directly.

"Suimei-dono, we don't particularly mind going ahead, but what specifically should we be doing? Are we to... support Mary-

done?”

“No, the more important goal here is to render the believers powerless. All you’ve gotta do is put every last one of them to sleep.”

“Is that really alright? Not assisting Lady Mary first, I mean,” Lefille asked.

“Well, I do want to save her... But it’ll be pointless if the god gets summoned anyway while we’re doing that. We won’t be able to do much with just us if the assimilation is successful. So we have to keep our priorities straight: our first objective is thinning their numbers.”

“Understood. Leave that to us.”

Making that fearless declaration, Lefille was truly dazzling.

“Wow, how promising. I actually feel kinda sorry for those guys now.”

Any magician squaring off against Lefille was in for the scare of their life. As a half-spirit, it would take a specialist to stand a chance against her. Your average magician would be completely powerless.

“Suimei-dono! Me too! I’ll also do my best! I owe Mary-dono a great deal!” Felmenia suddenly piped up.

“A-Aah... I’m counting on you too, Menia,” Suimei replied.

“Right!” Felmenia shouted with great enthusiasm.

After that, Suimei looked back toward the ghost town with a narrow gaze.

“Suimei?”

“Seeing the state of the barrier, I’m pretty confident she skipped checking things out properly and just charged right into the inner citadel. She probably thought that smashing it up would put an end to everything. And while I have to admit that it would, the chances of actually doing that are... Well, let’s just say it’s an overly optimistic plan. They should already have a certain amount of power drawn from the astral plane.”

“Where do you think... Hydemary is... right now?”

“Probably in the church. Look here. The building with the steeple.”

Suimei pulled out a few pictures of it for reference. The three girls nodded with determined looks on their faces, probably thinking they’d quickly defeat everyone so they could rush to save Hydemary. They were eager to repay her kindness in taking care of

them ever since coming to this world, but they too were overly optimistic.

“Don’t go there, alright? The place is gonna be trapped for sure,” Suimei cautioned.

“So you believe Lady Mary has already been caught?” Lefille asked.

“Without a doubt.”

Hydemary possessed very little experience, but possessed an overflowing abundance of knowledge. That was why she had a tendency to do things exactly according to theory. She acted in what she deemed to be the appropriate manner for the situation, believing that other rational beings would do the same. But because she never considered the irrational—the illogical and the unpredictable—she also had a tendency to fall prey to traps.

“If she weren’t caught, she would’ve settled this already. She also would’ve fled if things had gone south, but the guys outside aren’t acting like anything’s wrong. It’s pretty safe to say she went in as straightforward as could be, got caught in a trap, and has now been captured.”

“W-Will she be alright?” Felmenia asked in a worried tone.

“Yeah, she’s not that fragile a girl. I can still sense her presence just fine and everything.”

She’d most likely been entrapped by some sort of barrier magicka. The enforcement request had specifically cautioned about illusion barriers. As such, the most probable culprit was an enclosure-type binding barrier. Suimei didn’t know whether Hydemary was stuck in place or if she was stuck wandering around, but he wanted to get to her as soon as possible either way.

“Making me worry my ass off like this... We’re even on me vanishing at this point, capisce?”

Suimei continued to quietly mutter to himself out of concern for Hydemary.



After parting ways with Suimei for the time being, Felmenia and the other girls boldly decided on a frontal assault and headed straight for the ghost town. They were planning to settle things with an expeditious, decisive attack and showed no sign of hesitation in their movements. Felmenia enhanced her land speed with an

acceleration spell; Lefille wreathed herself in a red gale and kept up with such speed that her massive greatsword hardly seemed to weigh her down at all; and Liliana summoned Howler to ride along on its back.

“What’s... the plan?”

“I think it’s best that I take the front. What do you think, Lady Felmenia?”

“I agree. Lily and I will handle the enemies’ magicka.”

“Then it’s... decided.”

After hammering out the gist of things, their abrupt meeting came to a swift end. All three girls were professionals with battlefield experience. Their judgment was as quick as their discussion was to the point.

But one way or another, they now had their plan. Lefille would frontline as their vanguard to take out any magicians that tried to intercept her. Felmenia would cover Lefille while Liliana would move stealthily to take out the enemy’s rear guard. It was a blitzkrieg approach, so to speak. As long as they had Lefille and the power of the spirits—the ultimate trump card against unsuspecting magicians—there was no need for any petty tricks. All they were doing was buying time until Suimei finished dispelling the barrier. That meant the attack itself was an exceedingly simple affair. All they had to do was trust in their abilities, trust in each other, and trust that they could easily surpass their foes.

Once the girls hit the abandoned town, the guards immediately took notice. One of them—a man who seemed to have seniority—raised his voice.

“Who the hell are you?! The Thousand Nights?!”

“We shall be getting in your way!”

It was Felmenia that loudly answered the man. It was her intention to gather her enemies’ focus on herself, and just as planned, the guards all began readying magicka against her.



The guards wasted no further time with discussion, and instead began invoking their spells. They weren't just any spells, either. They were prioritizing speed, launching quick attacks that didn't require many steps—namely magicka of this world that bypassed the need for a chant altogether.

As Felmenia moved to respond in kind, Lefille jumped out from behind her. One of the enemy magicians sneered at such a bold entrance.

“Ha, an easy target! What a fool!”

Before Lefille could do anything, a volley of spells came flying at her. Her enemies had used numerology to create a rapid-fire blaze, much like a vastly inferior version of one of Suimei's favorite spells.

“That's one down!”

“Second line! Start with support and defensive magicka! Hurry and establish an encampment!”

Immediately following their first wave of spells, the order for the second was given. The enemy magicians considered Lefille preemptively defeated and were preparing for their next move: using support magicka to strengthen their offense and protective magicka to strengthen their defenses. They would establish an encampment where they could lay down magicka circles to create a ritual site, thereby allowing them to use much more powerful spells.

Or, at least, that was the plan. It all went up in smoke as a dazzling red light flooded the area, wiping out the volley of flames, their heat, and everything born of them in an instant.

“RAAAAAH!”

Following the red light came Lefille's war cry. As a half-spirit, low-level magicka had no effect on her. The power of the spirits granted her automatic rank disparity extinction against most spells, and her special attacks created an accumulation of spiritual power that made it impossible for most other mysteries to reach her. This was the first blow to the enemy magicians' formation.

The crimson wind of Ishaktney's Red Gale gathered at the tip of Lefille's greatsword as she held it aloft before thrusting it downward.

“Lebeh Luvuast!”

[Blade of Four Seals!]

A shockwave surged through the ground, which split apart with a burst of brilliant crimson light.

Then there was a split second of shock and silence. That oh-so brief calm before the storm.

And not a moment after that premonition befell the enemy magicians, they were surrounded on all sides by a whirling red gale. The flash from the fissure coiled into a vortex like a tornado that sent them all flying.

“That’s four down.”

Just as Lefille proclaimed, four of the enemy magicians were now down for the count. They lay twitching on the ground after being blown some distance away.

Following the lead magician’s orders, the other guards began unleashing light spells. Blinding flashes shot through the air like laser beams at Lefille, but she held her ground. She stood in place exactly where she was without even taking a defensive posture.

The intense light and heat of the spells assailed her, yet she looked indifferent. With her greatsword still pointed at the ground, she began marching forward towards her enemies. Seeing her approach like some kind of invincible monster, the magicians were rightfully shaken.

“E-Eep...”

“O-Our spells have no effect whatsoever? But how...?”

“That power’s... T-Telesma?! I-It can’t be! That woman’s not a human!”

Panic and confusion raced through the enemy line. The guards had never expected something even more outlandish than a magician would show up. But as Lefille stood towering in front of them like a proud battlement, there was a small shadow lurking close by.

They’re taking up positions... by the building...

Accompanied by Howler, Liliana was counting up the enemy magicians who were lying in wait for their chance to attack. They were currently behind a crumbling building, building up an impromptu defensive wall with magicka. It seemed they’d use it for cover as well as a vantage point to attack Lefille and Felmenia.

Liliana continued to observe them, internally remarking on their apparent experience fighting with magicka. In her world, such battles were a much simpler affair. Mages either fought each other in a fair, open confrontation, or were relegated to the rear lines in

order to support nonmagical combatants. But perhaps that was only inevitable. Not only were chant-reliant spells the standard for mages there, the very concept of a ritual encampment was completely foreign to them. The combat they knew was oversimple compared to the advanced strategies Liliana was witnessing here.

“Over here! There’s one over here too! Some kid magician!”

At last, Liliana had been noticed. In her world, her invisibility and lack of spiritual presence would have made her completely undetectable, but it seemed that wouldn’t quite cut it in this world. Nevertheless, just because they’d spotted her didn’t mean they stood a chance against her.

Liliana bundled her hands in front of her mouth as if to warm them with her breath, then whispered a curse into them. It looked as though she was merely talking to herself, but a viscous black lump took shape in her hands. She then began modeling the raw malice as if it were clay. Just touching it was dangerous... Or it would be to anyone but Liliana, who handled it freely and molded it to her will.

Liliana, you see, had a long history with malice and curses. Ever since she was a child, the people around her—her parents included—had showered her with curses. It made her more perceptible and sensitive to them. She’d even once brought forth an Astaroth, so a small curse like this was child’s play to her.

“Mr. Crow, Mr. Crow...”

She continued to mutter, as if whispering life into the clay. And with every word, the curse slowly took the shape of a crow.

“Mr. Crow, Mr. Crow... Your name is Noisy.”

The crow was completely black, right down to its beak and claws. Only its eyes had a subtle bluish-white tint to them.

“No way... How is she still herself after using magicka like that?”

The enemy magicians watched Liliana in complete astonishment. As expected, of course. What was happening before their very eyes was unthinkable, after all.

It was just as Suimei had said when he saved Liliana from the evil hand of the Astaroth she had summoned. In this world, systems of magicka were categorized, and the direct use of the double-edged sword of malice—as with the dark magic of the other world—had long been abandoned as an art. Anyone would be shocked to see it in this day and age.

Nevertheless, the magicians were too caught up in their encampment preparations to attack Liliana in time. She'd already finished making Noisy, and Howler was on the move. The phantom dog's howl counteracted the enemies' defenses, and as they immediately moved to invoke new magicka...

"CAa■■■Aa■■■W!"

Noisy's indescribably shrill caw interrupted their chants. Even the magicians who'd already finished theirs failed to invoke their spells.

"What...?"

"The cacophony of the crow's shriek is obstructing our spells!"

"Switch to gesture-activated spells only! Quickly!"

The magicians tried to overcome, but Howler and Noisy were still on the move as standalone forces. They did more than just obstruct magicka, you see. They were also quite capable of direct attacks.

Liliana's familiars proceeded to flush three magicians in the rear guard out of their hiding spot, and she then muttered in her usual tottering fashion...

"This is... how you use... a curse."

She then once more began kneading a curse, and a palpable change came over her voice.

"The fasting earth. It rots away and falls into ruin, never to return. All prayers are severed, all desires vanish, and by the cursing voices that number as many as the nights, the wintery fields turn to deserts. The voice of starvation comes from the depths. The voice of thirst comes from the abyss. Life has fallen. The women lament. But this is only the beginning. It stands upon the land and pulls the living down to their doom... Void Bog."

The curse expelled from her mouth crept across the ground like a black carpet. It pooled under the enemy's feet, melting the earth into a muddy bog. The magicians caught in the curse instantly began sinking into its depths

This was the spell Void Bog, which used the power of a wicked curse and the energy of the land to seal the magicka of its targets.

"It's... a burial."

That cold, tottering pronouncement was the last thing they heard before the darkness overtook them.



“Mrgh... It feels like I ended up on cleanup duty...”

Felmenia grumbled to herself, dissatisfied with the role she was left to fulfill. She was full of vigor before, eager to save Hydemary and repay her kindness. But now that the fighting had actually begun, there was far less competition than she thought there would be. It was rather anticlimactic.

But that was a matter of course. With Lefille’s power of the spirits dominating the front line and Liliana’s shadowy maneuvering on the rear, there wasn’t much left for Felmenia to do.

That was how she’d ended up—as she said—on cleanup duty. She was simply and quietly knocking out the magicians that Lefille hadn’t blown away.

“Brenn zu Tode!”

[Burn to death!]

They tried to invoke fire magicka to save themselves, but it was no use against Felmenia.

“Goodness... Shush, shush now. Quietly vanish.”

Using the appropriate mana, the appropriately laid out magicka circle, and the appropriately worded chant, Felmenia effortlessly negated the incoming fireball.

“Sh-She’s good...”

The enemy magicians were astonished by Felmenia’s flawless counterspell. They gritted their teeth in jealous frustration—proof of their admiration, even if Felmenia didn’t see it that way.

Fire, light, and lightning spells... It’s just as Suimei-dono said.

Suimei had predicted beforehand what magicka the guards would be relying on: high-temperature fire spells with explosive force, high-penetration light spells, and high-energy lightning spells. They each had their own attributes, but they were similar in that they were optimized for maximum destructive force.

Nevertheless, when one knew what type of magicka they’d be going up against, dealing with it was easy. That was what made the magicians Felmenia was facing remarkably inferior to the one she was studying under. As long as she was careful, even without any special or peculiar powers, defeating them would be an easy task.

Rather, with Felmenia’s talent and delicacy when it came to magicka...

“That was awfully crude, wasn’t it?”

“...”

Felmenia’s casual comment left the magicians speechless. There

was of course no ill will behind what she said; she was merely commenting on her observation of the situation. And that was exactly what made the enemy magicians keenly aware of the difference in ability between them and this odd girl. They could tell her exasperated words weren't a provocation. She was simply stating facts.

Felmenia's magicka was far more meticulous than theirs, and thus beautiful in a way that all magicians strived for. They devoted themselves to the pursuit of that beauty, and its demonstration revealed a magician's true abilities.

What followed was a series of offensive and defensive plays, none of which were particularly of note. The magicians would invoke more spells to attack Felmenia, and she would safeguard herself. When the chance presented itself, she would even counterattack, unerringly striking an enemy magician down every time.

It was just like clockwork. A fight of no real interest at all. Felmenia had no need to push her mana furnace to its limit. This was far beneath her full strength. Or rather, this was simply how strong she'd become.

If it had been Felmenia before she met Suimei, she would have undoubtedly been defeated in an instant. But she was no longer the girl she used to be. She wasn't Court Mage Felmenia anymore, but Felmenia the magician. And now that she too was a magician, foes like this were nothing before her natural talent and finesse.

It wasn't long before the enemy magicians who dared to stand against her were all rendered powerless.

"Mrmrmrgh... This just isn't enough."

It was hardly fair to call it a fight, but Felmenia didn't yet have the experience in magical battles to appreciate just how clearly that proved her superiority.



The attack by the three girls was a major shock to the magicians attempting the ritual. They had caught wind that the Thousand Nights Association was sending an Enforcer beforehand, but that was information the Association had leaked themselves. It was somewhat limited in scope and certainly didn't include details about exactly who was coming or when. Nevertheless, the

magicians knew an Enforcer would show up eventually, and so they had a plan in place for when the time came.

Indeed, they'd set a trap. In fact, they'd even caught someone in it. But almost immediately afterward, the ghost town was breached and assaulted. It came at a most inopportune time, too. The magicians had realized someone was attempting to dispel the barrier around the area, and they'd sent a strike force to handle it. And it was shortly after the strike force left that the assault began, as if to say bluntly and mockingly that the barrier interference was just a diversion.

This period right before the ritual was the time they were the most undermanned, but it was also when they were most vigilant. Yet, unfortunately for them, their opponents were simply out of their league.

There was the girl who trampled any and every magician that dared to come at her using mysteries of far higher rank. There was the girl who molded curses that would put a veteran witch doctor to shame. And then there was the girl who used intricately detailed spells to completely overwhelm their magicka.

None of those powers were anything that could be developed or trained in any short span of time. It was inconceivable that such young girls were wielding them freely. The summoning and apposition of a spirit in particular was astounding; the only word to describe it was unthinkable. Going up against such incredible forces, a third of the enemy magicians' defenses were rendered powerless.

And that number was continuing to increase. The opponent giving them the most trouble was in fact the red-haired girl wielding *telesma*. She was carefreely swinging around a greatsword and manipulating some manner of mysterious wind that was unrecorded in all the legends and myths of this world.

The sparkling red wind was of a far higher mystical grade than anything the magicians could muster. It blew them and their magicka away—their gestures, their chants, and everything else that composed their spells losing out to rank disparity extinction. If they tried to put up physical defenses, her greatsword would tear them apart. And if they tried to evade, they still couldn't outrun the red wind nipping at their heels.

Facing inevitable defeat, the leader of the guards—the highest-ranking member of the group right behind the homunculus boy—

gave new orders to his comrades.

“Stop the redhead! Use the encampment to the east!”

In preparation for the forewarned Enforcer attack, they had prepared multiple ritual sites within the ghost town for casting large-scale spells. The ones by the town entrance were destroyed before they were ever used, but there were still other—

“I-It’s no good! The eastern altar has been dismantled!”

“What?! When did...”

As the leader muttered to himself in disbelief, the girl with the platinum hair suddenly peeked out from the corner of an abandoned building... even though she’d been supporting the redhead just moments ago.

“Oh... Teehee!”

She seemed to start in surprise upon being discovered, only to retreat back around the corner with a giggle.

“That damn...!”

Though her childish mockery fanned the flames of his irritation, he had no time to give chase. His comrades facing the redheaded girl were being blown away, now with some kind of mysterious shockwave.

The redhead then approached the leader with absolute composure, her greatsword pointed to the ground in one hand. She stood tall and proud as the natural enemy of magicians.

The leader met her with a hostile glare.

“Are you one of those damn Enforcers?”

“Am I? Who knows?”

She gave him little answer other than a bold smile. In truth, it didn’t really matter if she was an Enforcer at this point. The simple fact that she was getting in their way made her an enemy.

But, just as the leader was about to invoke his magicka, he sensed mana behind him and heard the strange sound of something cutting through the wind. He turned around in a fluster to see a black shadow passing by his side.

Several ominously colored feathers fluttered to the ground. The man chased the shadow with his eyes and identified a crow cawing in a shrill voice. Taking a better look around, there were red-eyed crows on the roofs of all the surrounding buildings. The leader then whirled back around in a hurry to find a young girl with violet hair standing where no one had been before.

“Damn it...”

“Lily, cursing doesn’t suit you, okay? Also, do that outside the wind.”

The violet-haired girl bobbed her head, then leaped away like an agile rabbit.

Not yet... I can't let these little girls continue to mock me...

The leader’s defiant spirit was burning strong. They could still recover from this. There was still a path to victory. Half their troops were out of commission, but that meant they still had half their forces left. That was more than enough to have hope.

Even if they couldn’t defeat these girls right now, all they had to do was buy time for the summoning. As long as they could accomplish that, they could then use the power of divinity. With that, they would be able to defeat any opponent.

Their regulatory barrier may have already been dispelled, but that wasn’t integral to the ritual. It merely served to keep the summoned divinity in the most convenient state possible. Even without the barrier, the summoning could still take place. And upon remembering that, a certain thought passed through the leader’s head...

We just have to hold out a little longer. Nothing more.

The table had been set. The glassy-eyed magicians who’d taken the drug were already amassed in the center of town and the summoning ritual was in motion. It was possible the power grade of the god they summoned would be lower without everyone there to incite it properly, but it should still be enough. Neither these two magicians nor even the girl using telesma would be able to stand against it.

But that was only if things remained as they were. If it was just these three girls they were up against, then victory was still possible.

If, and only if.

And that fragile prospect was crushed in an instant. Indeed, the leader soon detected a tremendous amount of mana drawing nearer. Indeed, he realized that twilight was swiftly approaching from the ridgeline spreading out beyond the trees.

“What...?”

The afternoon sky was suddenly dyed in the hues of the setting sun. The sky was so red that it looked like a massive fire was burning just beyond the mountains. It was far too early in the day for the sun to be going down, but it was fading at a terrifying pace.

It was like someone had hit fast-forward on the sky as the light suddenly retreated behind the mountain range. Blue turned to orange, orange to indigo, and indigo to darkness.

It was like all the color had been drained away, the sky painted over by the black of night. And it was only then, in the bleak light of twilight, that it dawned on the leader.

The magician who calls down the stars brings the night with him. He wields a blue sword in his right hand and a golden shield in his left. Enrobed in black clothing and lightning, he condemns all evil in the name of the Thousand Nights.

That poem was well known among those who steeped themselves in the mysteries. It extolled the tremendous power of the Society magician who'd suppressed that most extraordinary of mystical calamities... the manifestation of a red dragon. It sung the praises of Enforcer Yakagi Suimei.

The leader could hear one of his troops audibly gulp.

"N-No way... E-Even Starfall is here?"

It wasn't long before a Japanese boy dressed in black appeared behind the three girls. He wore a suit—the preferred uniform of Society magicians—embroidered with a blue rose, a flower that signified both hope and his status as part of the Society's upper echelon.

He carried a sword clad in a pure blue brilliance in his right hand. His left was casually stuffed in his pocket. His face betrayed his young age, but his expression made it clear he was as ruthless as any magician.

It seemed, despite all the firepower the girls already had on the battlefield, their strongest weapon had only just arrived. As the enemy magicians froze over how to respond, the girl with the platinum hair suddenly raised a cheerful voice.

"Suimei-dono!"

"Sorry. It took me longer than I thought it would to clean up that barrier. But they responded in good fashion and deployed a proper troop after me, so I suppose that's commendable. Don't you think?"

Suimei's blazing eyes zeroed in on the leader of the magicians, who was stunned to see him. He never thought *this* would be the Enforcer they sent. It was true he had a reputation for handling mystical crimes and calamities related to divinity, but his whereabouts were supposedly unknown over the past several

months.

It was only here that the leader suddenly realized what was going on.

“It can’t be... That intel that was leaked to us on purpose?!”

“You got it. Both you and I have been dancing in the palms of the geezers at the Thousand Nights Association.”

Suimei spoke in a tired voice, but it couldn’t be more obvious he was seething deep down. There was a cold, cruel light shining behind his blazing eyes.

“Prepare offensive magicka! Throw everything you have at him!”

The leader quickly issued the order to open fire. He told his troops to attack for all they were worth, but they were already on it. You could say that their wills had aligned against the massive threat before them. But in truth, it would be more accurate to say that they were all just desperate. High-penetration light spells came at Suimei from every angle.

“Primum moenia, expansio munitum.”

[First rampart, fortified expansion.]

Suimei pulled his left hand from his pocket and uttered a short chant. A magicka circle took shape in the air in an instant, rotated, and expanded. The beams of light the enemy magicians fired crashed into the circle—which took the shape of a shield—and sparks scattered about violently. Yet none of them pierced through. Suimei simply moved his arm and turned about, dealing with the beams incoming from every direction as he began his next chant.

“Secundum moenia, expansio munitum.”

[Second rampart, fortified expansion.]

And the chants kept coming, one after another. One circle became two, one atop the other. The Golden Magnale. This was the defensive spell Suimei was known for.

In general, barrier magicka could only be actualized by assembling all the necessary components for the requisite ritual. One had to secure the land where they were to set up the circle and place said components to delineate the boundary. Even other types of reinforcement spells, such as those that created an encampment around the caster, required a certain amount of preparation.

However, Yakagi Suimei’s defensive barrier—a release-type fortified barrier—was a grand barrier modeled after the defenses of a castle. It would normally require tremendous measures and time

to prepare, and was constructed in stages.

By building the ramparts, the walls, the towers, and all other components of a castle, each with their own effects, and establishing them in their proper place... They all came together as key components of a ritual to invoke even more complex magicka, unifying into a single spell in the process.

Yet it was said that Suimei's barrier magicka could be constructed at impossible speeds. He could allegedly craft the whole thing in under three measly minutes.

It consumed a rather massive amount of mana, but mana consumption wasn't a serious obstacle to a high grand class magician. Be it by pulling power from ley lines or the stars, or by gathering aether from the air, there were countless means of stretching one's limits. And Suimei's mana furnace was most certainly operating at maximum efficiency.

"Mea aegis non est aegis. Prae omni oppugnatione est solida. Prae omni impetus est invicta. Invincibilis, immobilis, immortalis. Id est ardens aureum castrum ut colligit spiritus astorum. Eius nomen est— Mea firma aegis! Speciosum aureum magnale!"

[My shield is not a shield. It is sturdy before any and all offense. It is unshakeable before any and all attacks. Invincible, immobile, imperishable. It is the shining golden castle that collects the breath of the stars. Its name is— My firm shield! The brilliant golden fortress!]

Before long, and without allowing a single spell through, the release-type fortified barrier was completed.

The Golden Magnale was said to have once blocked a red dragon's roar. Its golden light was so radiant that it left an afterimage in one's eyes. Multiple layers of magicka circles lay on the ground, and several others were rotating in the air. Physical defense, mana defense, dampening, time stagnation... As his fortress, Suimei was free to enter and exit as he pleased, meaning he could launch attacks from within.

The biggest threat, however, was the fact that the fortress moved with its caster at its center. The enemy magicians got a full demonstration of this—Suimei was currently walking toward them, and the magickal fortress moved right along with him. It was uncanny. Unheard of, even.

But now that the barrier was up and complete, shining in all its brilliant glory, the only ones capable of piercing it were probably limited to renowned magicians and the Greed of Ten.

“The key to winning magicka battles is to either break your opponent’s trump card, or to put yourself in an advantageous position. The latter requires you to construct a proper encampment from start to finish. Just like this.”

There, Suimei spread out his arms as if beckoning his enemies to behold his magicka. Witnessing such a grand spell weakened their resolve immensely.

“Shit. Such pompous showboating even—”

But Suimei didn’t even give their leader time to complain.

“O flammae, legito. Pro venifici doloris clamore. Parito colluctatione et aestuato. Deferto impedimentum fatum atrox.”

[Oh flames, assemble. Like the cry of the magician’s resentment. Give form to death’s agony and burst into flames. Bestow the one who obstructs me with a dreadful destiny.]

“?!”

The instant he began invoking his magicka, Suimei’s mana roared as the elements in the air were sucked towards him. There was a brief moment where the wind pressure born from the explosive heat it generated broke the balance of the atmosphere. A magicka circle with the crest of Mars took shape, and a whirlpool of flames expanded in an almost artless manner. Sparks scattered every which way, making the scene all the more brilliant.

The flames swirling in the air looked like they were eagerly awaiting to be invoked. And upon closer inspection, Suimei held a bright red, incandescent gem floating just above his palm.

“Itaque conluceto. O Ashurbanipalis fulgidus lapillus.”

[So shine. Oh Ashurbanipal’s dazzling gem.]

“W-Wait—”

The leader’s scream, verging on begging for his life, was drowned out by the explosion that followed immediately after Suimei crushed the gem in his hand. All sound ceased for the leader as if his eardrums had burst. All he could hear now was a buzzing like the distant hum of some machine. The blaze and its detonation were incomparable to the fire spells his comrades used earlier, and they plowed the landscape in all directions with a shockwave that bent even the trees back under its great force.

There weren’t many present who could put up a defensive wall to protect themselves on the spot.

“Urgh...”

Even those who’d managed to do so were unable to fully

protect themselves in the wake of Suimei's flames. The leader screamed in anguish from the pain of burns all over his body.

As the flames eventually died down, the entire town was filled with similar cries. The enemy magicians who'd been unable to defend themselves lay writhing here and there as a horrible burning stench settled in the air. The ground itself had melted in the heat of the blast, the red glow of which still lingered in Suimei's eyes.

The leader attempted to restore his hearing by applying healing magicka to his eardrums. Meanwhile, backup troops arrived from the rear line and began assisting their fallen comrades.

"Hey! You okay?!"

"Gah... The burns... My body..."

One of the backup troops propped the leader up in their arms and began casting a recovery spell on him. And all the while, the Enforcer who'd authored this disastrous scene was unexpectedly just standing there and watching. If the leader and his troops were healed, they could return to the battle. Not only that, but they would be stronger now with the reinforcements from the rear. So what was Suimei thinking?

Really, he was observing the situation as though he were the one who found it rather unexpected.

"Hmm? So you've got enough guts to try and help your friends, huh? Sorry, but that was a poor choice right now."

"Wha— GAH!"

The magician who'd come to help the leader suddenly screamed before tumbling to the ground in apparent agony.

"Wh-What?"

"Hey! What's— AAAAAGH!"

And after the one magician sank into inexplicable suffering, the others who'd come to help fell under the same spell. It was as if the pain of the burns had been passed to them. Meanwhile, Suimei simply continued to watch things unfold with an exasperated sigh.

"You should really study *The Golden Bough*. Isn't it the foundation of magicka?"

"*The Golden Bough*...? I see... This is... contagion magicka..."

The law of contagion could indeed be called the foundation of magicka. If one touched a cursed item, the curse would infect them. That was an elementary law of magicka, and precisely how the reinforcements had become so afflicted. Just by touching their cursed friends, their fates were sealed.

The modern world had the Hague and Geneva Conventions to restrict the use of certain types of weaponry. In the same vein, magicians also had rules prohibiting certain types of magicka. But spells weren't forbidden for their destructive power. Rather, they were blacklisted when their effects were deemed to be too cruel and brutal. Any magician caught using such spells was subject to severe punishment.

But one perk of being an Enforcer was freedom from such censure. They were allowed to use prohibited spells in the name of passing judgment on magicians who dared to disturb the order of the world. They fought fire with fire, so to speak.

Free use of strong suggestion spells that verged on mind control. Permission to use time manipulation to create eternal seals. Authority to invoke any and all grand magicka. Allowance to spread deadly poisons over limited areas. And of course, the ability to cause...

"A-A curse outbreak with contagion magicka..."

Upon contact, the mystical force transmitted from one subject to another, manifesting the original magicka within the new target. It was a virus-type curse. Should it be loosed in a populated area, it could shut down an entire city in the blink of an eye. Anyone who came to help would become secondary casualties, just like the reinforcements had here. And with the cause remaining unclear, a third, fourth, and fifth wave of casualties would quickly follow. It could easily reach pandemic levels, threatening the entire world.

And that was precisely why contagion magicka had been blacklisted by the Thousand Nights Association. Even the girls who stood at Suimei's side recognized the threat it posed. Frankly, they were downright terrified of it. Seeing so many people fall to the ground in the throes of sheer agony... It was just too brutal a sight. It rendered them speechless.

"I don't really like using stuff like this, but I can't say it bothers me to use it on bad guys."

Or so Suimei boasted, but this was still on the gentler side of things. Enforcement targets were to be brought to justice dead or alive. The lighter the crime, the more likely a target was to simply be captured. But the most heinous criminals were dealt with accordingly. Enforcers took their self-defense seriously and didn't hesitate to consign their targets to oblivion.

And the cries that filled the town—the abject suffering they

were in—was proof these targets were still alive. Suimei, in a way, was being compassionate. But considering the skill it had taken to render so many magicians powerless through the use of an infectious curse without killing anyone... Their leader couldn't help shuddering before Suimei's power.

On the other hand, the girl with the platinum hair timidly turned a question to Suimei.

"S-Suimei-dono... Is this magicka similar to my Rainyblaze Clouds?"

"It's different, you know? Your flames physically leap while this is a contagion. Oh, but you can't use that spell over here. Anyone who does that without permission here gets arrested." Or so he said, but he shrugged as though it weren't a big deal. "Anyway, as you can see, this is the result. It's pretty much perfect performance for a spell, right?"

A gulp could be heard. Even Suimei's allies shuddered at his abilities. All three girls beheld him with abject shock.

The redheaded girl in particular spoke up with an astonished sigh.

"Using multiple large-scale spells at once is one thing, but this is something else entirely. You did say that you'd be back to your normal self upon returning here, but I never expected *this*."

"All I said was that the destructive power of my spells would be back to normal. I never said I didn't know any stronger spells, did I?"

"Suimei-kun... You really should cut that out already."

"Haha, my bad."

Under the redheaded girl's reproachful gaze, Suimei let out a nervous giggle. When all of a sudden... everything began shaking.

"Hrm?"

"This is..."

It was like an earthquake, but wasn't. It was the manifestation of a manafield vibration—the precursor to the outbreak of tremendous mystical phenomena. It was like the air was screaming as space itself was being torn apart. Debris rose into the air, and the rubble that fell back to the ground exploded into electrical currents.

Immediately after the shaking started, a light shot out of the center of town. Suimei's Bless Blade had brought forth an illusory night, which was now pierced by the rising light that rivaled the brilliance of his golden fortress.

The leader turned to his troops to confirm what was going on in a fluster.

“Th-The ritual?!”

“We’re saved! It’ll be done soon!”

“Pfft! Bwahahaha! You fools! This is what you get for just standing there! Victory is ours!”

The ritual was at last on the verge of completion. Learning this, the leader burst into laughter as if he’d forgotten the pain of his burns. With the incarnation of an incredible power—a *divine* power—victory was surely at hand. Or so he thought.

The ruined buildings crumbled as white lines ran across the ground, tracing a massive magicka circle that expanded and grew even larger.

“S-Suimei-dono, this is...”

Seeing this unfold, the girl with the platinum hair turned pale and trembled. She appeared to be perplexed as to exactly why this inspired such fear in her, but it was only natural. Any magician would tremble at the indescribable chill of what was to come. Even the violet-haired girl was shaking.

The only two who stood unaffected were Enforcer Yakagi Suimei and the tesma-wielding redhead. Even the enemy magicians were unable to hide their agitation at the immense power that accompanied the summoning of divinity. Their leader was no exception.

It wasn’t long before the summoned god began crawling out of the still-unstable magicka circle and clawing at its edges. Its form had yet to stabilize. Only its murky-looking arm reached out of the blinding luminescence into this world... almost as if it were climbing up out of hell.

“Suimei-kun, it’s happening!”

“This is... bad.”

The redhead and the girl with the violet hair began to concentrate their strength, but Suimei held out his hand to stop them.

“S-Suimei-kun?! Why are you stopping us?!”

“The fundamentals of summoning. If you forcefully intervene now in a grand ritual like this, it will trigger a rebound that’ll be a disaster. It’s safer to let the summoning complete and send the god back while it’s still in an unstable and dazed state.”

There, the girl with the platinum hair seemed to recall

something.

“Oh... This is like what happened back at the royal castle.”

“Exactly. The regulating barrier has already been dispelled. They’ll no longer be able to assimilate with the god, so we haven’t lost just yet.”

“Then...”

“We wait for its existence to coalesce and blow it away in a single shot.”

Or so Suimei said, but the enemy leader didn’t seem to think it would be that easy.

“Even if you’re an Enforcer, you couldn’t possibly have the power to repel divinity just like that!”

“You don’t think so? Unfortunately for you, this isn’t my first rodeo.”

The arrogance in Suimei’s voice was like oil on the fire of the leader’s indignance.

“You’re bluffing! There’s no way you can do that!”

“Yeah! We’re talking about a god here!”

“One magician can’t do anything about it!”

Just like that, his comrades rallied to claim it was impossible. They too were certain of their victory. But at this point... it didn’t sound like anything more than denial. Almost like they were pleading for Suimei to back down.

And *that* was the real question: if their victory was so certainly at hand, why were they so anxious?

As the leader regained his composure, the answer dawned on him in the form of a chill down his spine. A bad premonition. There must have been a reason Yakagi Suimei of all people had been sent. And that reason... Suimei had said it himself. This wasn’t his first rodeo. Indeed, it wasn’t his first time repelling divinity from this world.

“Holy lightning...”

The mutter that unwittingly escaped the leader’s lips coaxed a smug grin from Suimei. He looked as though he thought nothing—No, as though he feared nothing of the terrifying threat looming over him.

The shockwave and accompanying tremors were still ongoing, even now. Power continued to pour out of the white magicka circle, the surplus turning into lightning that assaulted the area. The pale radiance was taking shape like kneaded clay, gradually forming into

the figure of a massive god. Everything it touched turned instantly to rubble. And as it clawed its way further out of the circle, there was a blast of wind that blew even the rubble away.

The next thing to emerge from the light was a head—one with a massive eye and distorted features. It was far too profane to be revered as something holy... But its hideous, unstable figure slowly took the form its believers projected upon it. It was approaching its divine nature as it repeatedly expanded and contracted, gradually taking shape as it eventually emerged in its totality from the magicka circle.

Its majesty was such that it forced all to kneel before it. The girls were no exception. It was as if no one could stand against the calamity before them. Everyone understood that within it lay a fury which equaled its majesty. The god's true nature had yet to be determined, but it destroyed everything it touched... Good or evil, it was calamity incarnate.

And before such calamity, only Suimei remained perfectly composed. He stabbed his mercury katana into the ground, pulled at the lapels of his suit to get himself comfortable, and then...

“Abreq ad Habra.”

[Hurl your thunderbolt even unto death.]

He held one arm out like a blade, and lightning took form in an instant. From the sky above to distant cities, it felt like all the world's electricity was being plundered by its roots. All the energy in the region that was electric in nature came together in a pale flash. At the same time, an inorganic-looking bust of a woman appeared behind Suimei.

It was here that he began his true chant.

“Dico. Illa qui impediunt me, tu es illa qui indignantur me. Ergo, tu es mea mors. Itaque, o fulgur caerulum. O locum id adducit. O illa qui conligant praeter me. Dissipato prae mea fulgur —”

[I hereby declare. All who stand in my path, thou art those who resent me. Thus, thou art none other than my greatest obstacle, my death. So, oh pale lightning. Oh destination where it arrives. Oh those gathered before me. Scatter to the winds before my lightning—]

The artlessly scattering lightning converged at Suimei's fingertips like a reverse ripple. A pale sphere of pure energy took shape alongside a magicka circle that continuously compressed it. Before long, the god stretched its arm for Suimei, who responded by

reaching his sparking hand out in kind. Magicka circles projected forward in a row towards the god as if to create a channel stretching between them.

“Return whence you belong.”

Then, with the piercing shriek of a woman, a torrent of blue lightning fell right through the god, tearing open clouds above to reveal the jet-black sky.



And so, the god that had crawled out of the magicka circle was destroyed by Suimei's Abreq ad Habra and returned to the astral plane. All that remained were the fallen believers and the pale lightning still dancing along the ground. Such lingering effects were quite common after the invocation of grand magicka.

Suimei pulled his mercury katana out of the ground, dismissed the magicka that shaped it, and brushed away the residual lightning with his right hand. As he did, words finally seemed to return to Felmenia, who was still half dumbfounded by what she'd just witnessed.

“What terrifying power...”

“Well, that's how it goes now that I'm back here.”

Suimei's spell had pierced the heavens with enough force to blow away an entire mountain. He'd used the same spell twice previously in the other world, but never with this much destructive power. It left Felmenia dazed for a short while as she admired the lingering lightning, when all of a sudden something else seemed to strike her entirely.

“Now let's go save Mary-dono!”

She immediately and hurriedly started to head for the church when the leader of the enemy mages began to laugh. Suimei and the girls all looked at him with puzzled expressions.

“You're talking about the homunculus who came ahead of you, right? Our boss has surely taken care of her by now,” he scoffed.

“Your boss, huh?” Suimei scoffed in return.

In all likelihood, their boss was the homunculus detailed in the enforcement request. This drew Suimei's gaze to the church.

“That thing?”

“You bet your ass.”

““That thing”? What are you guys talking about, Suimei-kun?”

Lefille asked.

Suimei put his hand to his jaw. There was something like a shimmering heat haze in the direction of the church.

“It’s barrier magicka. Probably the kind that locks its target within the spiritual world. An enclosure-type illusion barrier.”

Just as the enforcement request had warned, barrier magicka was the target’s forte. Specifically enclosure-type illusion barriers. The enclosure element indicated the target was stuck within, and the illusion part indicated the target was under the effects of some kind of hallucination. Hydemary was probably trapped by said hallucinations, roaming endlessly inside the barrier.

There, the leader turned a dark look of animosity on Suimei.

“With the boss on our side, even you’re—”

“No match for you guys, huh? What do you take me for?”

“Ha! You’re up against a homunculus—a natural genius! A mere human can’t hope to match his knowledge!”

He certainly had a point there. By their very nature, homunculi possessed vast knowledge. Knowledge in itself was a great power to magicians; its presence or lack thereof alone could determine their caliber. However...

“And that’s how you instigated him?”

“Huh? What’re you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb. You guys claimed you couldn’t carry the burden of being the vessel so you could schluff it on him, right? Homunculi are smart, so they don’t make many mistakes. But that’s exactly how you guys took advantage of the distortion of a homunculus, isn’t it?”

“...”

There, the leader fell silent. Suimei had hit the nail on the head, and he knew it. Felmenia, however, looked absolutely puzzled.

“Suimei-dono, what do you mean by ‘the distortion of a homunculus’?”

“Homunculi are born with great knowledge. Imagine a child with the most comprehensive education you could imagine and then some. But, in the end, they are still children. Because they possess nothing but knowledge with no personal experience, it’s easy to destabilize their minds. And that’s exactly how these guys took advantage of one for their own goals. They probably told him that if he assimilated with a god, it would fill the void in his heart.”

Suimei paused there for a moment before cutting to the real

heart of the matter.

“This is the picture you guys were painting. You make it seem like the ringleader is the homunculus when you’re really the ones leading him by the nose. All so you could take advantage of his power. You used the vanity of a genius and his craving for the limelight against him.”

It was said that homunculi were susceptible to instabilities of the mind because of the gap between their knowledge and experience. And since they were created for the sake of humans, they were naturally predisposed to listen to them. That was what made it possible to take advantage of them thusly.

“What about it? Isn’t it normal for humans to use homunculi? He’s also using us ’cause he wants a place to belong, right?”

“I can’t deny that. However, as magicians, you should be able to figure it the fuck out on your own. No, I take that back. This dumb bullshit suits idiots like you who’ve abandoned your pride as magicians .”

“Ugh...”

Suimei stood before the leader, who was now groaning in pain again as he passed down an Enforcer’s judgment upon him.

“Former Alphard Nine, Saix Ruger. By the request of the Thousand Nights Association, though I’ll spare you your life, you’re under arrest.”

“We’ve fallen so far...”

“If you want to revive your organization, do it the right way. You should’ve known something that would bring the Thousand Nights Association down on you was wrong out of the gate,” Suimei spat at the fallen leader before turning to Felmenia. “I’ll go get Hydemary. You three restrain these guys. Not that they’ll be moving much with those burns.”

He then set off for the church.

“That’s an enclosure-type barrier! You can’t possibly break in from the out—”

Saix was undoubtedly about to claim it was impossible, seemingly forgetting that Suimei had already done the impossible today.

The second Suimei touched the outside of the barrier, he suddenly recalled something he’d once heard about Hydemary. Something the leader of the Society once told him...



It happened in the same dimly-lit room.

“Mr. Suimei.”

“Yes?”

“You know, about that familiar of yours...”

“Hydemary isn’t my familiar. She’s my disciple.”

“Not so, Mr. Suimei. She’s classified as a familiar. No matter how you gloss that over, it won’t change the fact that she isn’t human. Do you think otherwise?”

“I mean, that’s objectively true, but...”

But even so, Suimei didn’t want to treat her as a familiar. The sour expression on his face said as much, but Nettesheim shook his head.

“You shouldn’t treat that girl too much like a human, okay? It won’t do either of you any good.”

“That may be, but I can’t just treat her like an object.”

Suimei objected in a clear and decisive tone, but Nettesheim chuckled and laughed the whole thing off as a misunderstanding.

“Aah, no, certainly not. That’s not what I meant. Just being a familiar doesn’t make her the menial servant of a magician; in fact, you *shouldn’t* treat her like an object. Nevertheless, if you don’t respect the differences between the two of you, it will create an impassable divide between you.”

“Is that so?”

Suimei was relieved to hear what Nettesheim had really meant and shot him a dirty look as admonishment for not being more careful with his choice of words to begin with, but Nettesheim again laughed it all off.

“Heh, maybe I *was* being a bit too mean. That said, that’s not exactly what I wanted to tell you today. About that girl...”

“You mean Mary?”

“Yup, her. Do you know that homunculi have strong ties to the Akashic Records?”

“Yes. I’ve heard that they’re granted knowledge from the Akashic Records upon creation via a special quality of the Lapis Philosophorum that gives them life.”

“Precisely. The Akashic Records are the source of a homunculus’s knowledge. It’s what gives them their very shape and the reason they’re called geniuses. There’s a deficiency in this,

however,” Nettesheim said with a pause before concluding. “The Akashic Records do not go as far as granting homunculi human nature.”

“Really? The Akashic Records are the annals of all history—present, past, and future. Shouldn’t the subtleties of human emotion be recorded in there as well?”

“As objective knowledge, yes. But no matter how you approach it, learning something and actually experiencing it are very different things. That’s true even for humans. We develop and grow based on the experiences we accumulate beginning the day we become aware of the world.”

“And you’re saying homunculi are the same?”

“Mr. Suimei, no matter the being, growth requires the accumulation of experience. People go through things, foster ways of dealing with them, and use that to develop and mold their ego. The knowledge granted from the Akashic Records is sterile in that sense. That girl may learn of all the experience in the world from them, but that experience will never be hers.”

That much made sense. In short, learning from the Akashic Records was no different than learning from any other book. Just reading something wasn’t the same as actually experiencing it.

“That girl is a genius. She’s naturally gifted. Quite literally. Her gift comes from nature. Nothing she has is anything she’s acquired through her own efforts, and yet she carries herself with the utmost confidence. Do you see the dissonance there?”

“...”

Nettesheim certainly had a point. People gained confidence from experiences with success, so it was indeed strange that Hydemary behaved so confidently when she had none to speak of. And even though her vast knowledge should have made her keenly aware that such conceit was foolish, she still continued to behave that way. It didn’t make sense.

“Edgar always was lacking in such sensibilities. He’s quite talented, and like me, he’s an eccentric who likes to keep his distance from worldly affairs. That’s why he entrusted that girl to you.” There, Nettesheim’s cheerful tone grew meek as he said, “As long as that dissonance exists, it’s only a matter of time before she loses her way. So... when that time comes, Mr. Suimei, you must be the one to guide her.”

Nettesheim asked Suimei to be a guiding light for Hydemary,

however...

“Am I capable of such a thing?”

Suimei was unsure he was fit for the task. Why did Nettesheim have such a high opinion of him? He was still so young. He’d yet to have a lover, let alone a child. What did he know about guiding others? Suimei’s eyes asked that and more as he looked to Nettesheim, who responded with a grin.

“Mr. Suimei, the very way you live speaks to your dream. You may share common goals with all of us, but your dream belongs uniquely to you. It’s a light that shines brighter than all else within the darkness. It’s a childish dream of no remarkable conceit, and oh-so priceless. It is the answer to all prayers and a beacon to light the way of the lost.”

Nettesheim recited those words like a poem, and then said...

“When people lose sight of themselves, they can still move forward as long as there’s a light to guide their way. When even the very ground beneath them is uncertain, they can still crawl towards the light. That’s why... When the time comes, you must show that girl your dream.”

Finding this all somewhat embarrassing, Suimei grew even more reluctant.

“You really think she’d stoop to something as unsightly as crawling?”

“There’s no need to worry about that. As long as you—the one who possesses everything she doesn’t—are there, she will surely chase after you.”

“She’ll chase after me...?”

Hearing that, Suimei couldn’t help recalling the day he’d first brought Hydemary to the Society. She proclaimed herself a genius, unwittingly validating everything Nettesheim had just said. It was like she staked her very identity on it. It was her sense of self. In other words, she was struggling against it unconsciously.

Being different from others was so, so helplessly lonely. Not possessing anything made her so, so helplessly anxious. That constant mantra—“I’m a genius, I’m a genius”—was a desperate cry to distract herself from what she really felt.



“You’re worthless.”

“You’re unwanted.”

“Nobody needs you.”

Familiar voices kept repeating the same things. They told her she was disposable, unwanted. That everyone thought that way.

The voices came from shadows. Familiar shadows. One had the silhouette of the old man she idolized as her father. Others looked like her older sisters.

“Stop... Please stop already...”

She didn’t want to hear them. Not those voices, and not those words.

Hydemary had never once thought that she’d been abandoned. She’d believed with surety that she was needed, that people even relied on her. But there was no silencing that lingering, nagging question in her heart. Why was it that her older sisters—automata possessing wills—were educated by their father while she was sent away?

There were times when it crossed her mind that she might no longer be needed, just as the blond boy claimed. It was normal for parents to raise their own children. For a few years, at least. But Hydemary had been given away shortly after she was born. Was it because Edgar saw no need to raise her? Was it because he had no affection for her as his child?

Just like that, Hydemary’s anxieties piled atop one another and compounded. The familiar voices stabbing at her made it all the worse.

“You’re unwanted.”

“You were thrown away.”

The shadows stretched out over her as if to crush her into the ground of this sealed magenta world. She huddled down and covered her ears to block out the whispering shadows, when...

“Good grief...”

The shadows surrounding her were suddenly cut apart by magicka as a new voice—a familiar yet exasperated one—reached Hydemary’s ears.

“What are you doing, genius? Getting caught in a spell like this isn’t like you, now is it?”

Of course, the one to appear through the shadows was none other than Yakagi Suimei.

“I see... So now it’s you, Suimei-kun.”

“Hmm?”

“You’re here to tell me that you don’t need me either, right?”

“Hey, don’t space out on me. I’m the real thing, you hear? I’m not one of these shadows that’s been tormenting you.”

“It... It is you.”

Taking a closer look, Hydemary saw that it really was Suimei. All the other figures had been mere shadows, but this was a real person with full substance and color. Hydemary didn’t know what he was doing, but non-shadow Suimei didn’t seem to be here to disparage her. He just muttered “good grief” again in astonishment as he drooped his shoulders.

“Hey... Suimei-kun, am I an unwanted child?”

“Wha? Unwanted?”

“Yeah. Didn’t my father send me away because he didn’t need me anymore?”

There, Suimei shook his head.

“Like hell he did. If the meister thought he didn’t need you anymore, there’s no way he would’ve sent you to the Society.”

“Then why did he send me away? Is there any reason for me to learn other magicka when I already have my own?”

“That...”

That, Suimei couldn’t answer. It was true that Hydemary was born into the world with magicka of her own. There really wasn’t a need for her to go out of her way to learn other magicka. She was already a full-fledged magician, meaning there was no real reason to send her to the Society. There was no reason she needed to study under Suimei or become his disciple.

“My father made me, and then he was done with me. That’s why he sent me away, isn’t it? He kept all of my older sisters by his side...”

At this, Suimei’s tone took a capricious turn.

“Oh, come on. Where’d your usual sass go? Don’t tell me you got all depressed just ’cause someone said something you weren’t used to hearing. Or did you? That why you got caught in this crap?”

“I’m... I’m being serious here!”

His nonchalant attitude was far too irritating. Hydemary couldn’t help screaming at him, and with that, it felt like something murky and dark began overflowing from the pit of her stomach.

“My father created me, but I was never given a task or a goal! He just sent me away! He never even told me that I was useful as a homunculus, or as a magician for that matter... So what good *am*

I?!”

“If a genius like you isn’t good for anything, then what about a mediocre chump like me?”

“What’s mediocre about you?! You can do anything! You know so much! Everyone acknowledges you! But not me! I don’t have any of that going for me!”

Indeed, Hydemary had no experience. She’d accomplished nothing. So what if she was a genius? The only thing she could take pride in was the single fact that she was homunculus. And what was that even worth? It too was something that had been bestowed upon her.

“I was created! The power I possess, the knowledge I have, my talent... It was all given to me! Every last bit of it! I possess nothing of my own! Nothing!”

Hydemary screamed her lungs empty, her chest heaving up and down for air. Even she was surprised at the loud, violent force of the emotions within her.

She’d been created. She’d been given everything she had. In other words, she—or an exact replica of her—could be made again. So what worth was there in her specifically? What truly made her special? There was no way for her to know.

But upon screaming her heart out, she neither wept nor wailed. All was finally silent when a gentle hand fell upon her shoulder.

“Did you get it all out?”

“I’m...”

“Mary... It’s true that you’re different from normal humans. You were born with the world at your fingertips, and you’re capable of doing most anything on your own. But that’s not all there is to you, right? No one’s worth is determined the moment they’re born. It’s something that gradually takes shape bit by bit over a long, long period of time.”

“It happens... over time?”

“Yeah. People need time to grow into their own, and you’re no exception. You don’t just get to skip that part of the process.”

“But... there’s no guarantee I will, right?”

“That’s why the meister sent you to me. So that you can acquire what you don’t have—what you want—with your own two hands. It definitely wasn’t because you’re unwanted.”

That was entirely possible... But there was also another possibility. If the shadows were right and Hydemary really was

unwanted...

There was no place for her in this world.

And as her vision shook from such anxieties, she looked up at Suimei who gently smiled back down at her.

“But even so... Even if no one else needs you...”

This young man was always chasing his dreams, trying to save those who couldn't be saved. He was always so radiant, so earnestly running forward. That was simply who he was. And precisely because of that, he held his hand out to Hydemary without hesitation.

“I need you. So don't talk about yourself like that.”

It was why he knelt down next to her, huddled up on the floor, and beckoned her to come with him.

“You... need me? Really?”

“Yeah.”

“You won't go anywhere anymore? You won't vanish out of nowhere again?”

“Yeah.”

“I hate it, you know? Being left behind like that. Do you have any idea how lonely it is?”

“Don't worry. I'm right here now. So...”

Take my hand, he said.

Take it and never let go, he said.

I'll guide you to where you belong, he said.

A warmth blossomed in Hydemary's chest upon hearing those words. Before she knew it, the anxiety that had been tormenting her vanished like the shadows.

“Mm!”

And so she took his hand with a grand nod. The force that pulled her up was strong, reliable, and overflowing with confidence.

Yes, this was it. Wasn't it precisely because Suimei was this sort of human that she'd decided to follow him to begin with? Why hadn't she realized it sooner? She'd fallen to the throes of depression and ended up dancing to the blond boy's tune. It was a splendid trap, and a pity that she fell for it. Oh-so pitiable, but nevertheless unavoidable.

Because Hydemary needed *him*. She needed Yakagi Suimei.

Suimei sat there for a short while, stroking Hydemary's head with great affection as though comforting a small child. But it was a pleasant sensation, like she was at his mercy.

“Have you calmed down now?”

“Mm, I guess. That was quite the disgraceful act I put on. Utterly lame, and completely unbecoming of me.”

“You’re right about that. Being at least this impudent is more your style.” Suimei then let out a hearty chuckle before asking, “Can you tell what’s going on?”

“Well... This is a mental barrier. An enclosure-type illusion barrier, no?”

“Sounds like you’re fine, then. But seriously, you’ve got some screws loose to get caught in this kinda crap, you know?”

“Oh, I know. This is absolutely beneath me.”

Her tone was so haughty that no one would have ever guessed the height of her despair just moments ago. But Suimei was glad to hear it, for he accepted Hydemary as she was and—at last—things were back to normal.

“Let’s go. Time to smash this barrier and give that guy who poisoned your mind with all that crap a good slugging.”

“Agreed. I need to return the favor for embarrassing me like that.”

With that, she took chase after Suimei as he moved to destroy the barrier. She followed his figure, that ever-dazzling figure. And as she stared at him running out ahead of her, a thought passed through her mind...

One day, she too would become a magician that pursued the dream we all dream. A magician that saved people. A magician needed by someone. Just like him.

And to that end...

“Kunng-Lei Maximum Licht.”

She spoke the words to unleash her mana furnace.



Hydemary’s mana amplified with a tremor. She pushed her mana furnace to its limits, shattering the barrier from within it. Now that she was herself again, that much was a simple task.

The illusory world vanished and dissolved back into the interior of a church. The church itself was likely the boundary of the barrier. And once said barrier was gone, the lovely soprano voice of a young boy came down from where the altar would be.

“Oh dear, so they ended up failing completely? All bark and no

bite, I see.”

A beautiful blond boy enrobed in white stood before Suimei and Hydemary. He was the one who'd been responsible for sealing Hydemary in the illusory magenta world. Suimei had all manner of questions for him, including why he hadn't interfered when Suimei repelled the summoned god or when he rescued Hydemary, but he put that all aside for now.

Suimei and Hydemary were both vigilantly building up their mana as the blond boy turned a question to them instead.

“Who exactly are you?”

It was particularly directed at Suimei, who gave a rather straightforward response.

“Me? Yakagi Suimei of the Society.”

“Ah, so you're the one they call Evening Starfall. You must be the Enforcer.”

The blond boy calmly evaluated Suimei, who flashed his usual cynical smile.

“You're being awfully casual about this, aintcha? Your little scheme's already been blown, you know?”

“I have to correct you on one point. This was their scheme, not mine.”

“I'm sure it was all Saix's idea, yeah... But you had a horse in this race too, didn't you?”

“Indeed. But in the end, it doesn't really matter to me.”

“What do you mean?”

Rather than the boy, Hydemary was the one to answer Suimei there.

“In short, even without assimilating with a god, he'll be content as long as he defeats the human who repelled it.”

“That's exactly right. If I can defeat you, who struck down a god, I'll be able to fulfill my goal.”

His ambition had changed partway through. That was why he hadn't bothered to stop Suimei outside or when he came to save Hydemary. Indeed, the moment Suimei challenged the god and defeated it, there was a change of plans.

He wanted to display his abilities to the world. Assimilating a god was a concise way to accomplish that, but now that a human had repelled the summoned god... striking that human down would be an even better demonstration.

In short, this boy wasn't much different than Hydemary. He was

tormented by the emptiness created by the dissonance between his abundant knowledge and his lack of experience—the homunculi’s dilemma. All of this was to fill the void inside him. Suimei’s heart was shaken with pity, but the blond boy made a bold declaration from on high.

“Evening Starfall, I shall defeat you here. I failed to assimilate a god, but if I can defeat a genius like you, it will fill the emptiness within me all the more.”

“A genius, huh? I gotta say, I’ve never thought of myself that way.”

“Are you trying to taunt me...? Aah, it’s really working. That pisses me off. And what would you call yourself if not a genius? You who expelled divinity from the world. You who defeated two of the Greed of Ten. You who struck down the red dragon that heralded the apocalypse.”

Suimei countered the blond boy’s increasingly theatrical tone with a self-deprecating smile.

“I’m no genius. I just never know when to give up.”

“Say what you will, but the world judges you otherwise.”

That much was certainly true. The way one thinks of themselves and the way the world thinks of them are two different things, and the individual rarely has control over how the world esteems them.

“Anyways, I’m not your opponent.”

“Are you telling me to defeat your disciple first? The self-proclaimed masterpiece who fell right into my trap?”

“The very one. This time, try beating her in a proper magicka battle without any sly tricks. You manage that, and I’ll take you on all you want.”

“You sure are looking down on me.”

The blond boy then turned to Hydemary, who pointed her wand at him.

“You really got me good,” she said. “I never thought you’d play a hand like that.”

“It only worked because your heart was so unguarded. I never thought you’d break out of it. You could’ve escaped from all those painful thoughts if you’d just shriveled away within that barrier.”

The blond boy began amassing mana, and the scenery of the room began to warp.

“But you’re still far too careless. This church is my encampment. I have more than one barrier prepared here.”

With that, the dizzying warping grew more violent with the shrill shriek of what sounded like grinding metal. It was likely the aggravation of phenomena from the establishment of his completed magicka. The boy then spoke the words to activate his barrier.

“Oh barrier! Manifest!”

A magicka circle deployed at his feet and a manalight dome as white as flour encircled Hydemary. It was positioned just like a defensive wall, but there was no way a barrier like this was meant for protection.

The boy held out his hand and slowly pantomimed crushing something within it. Following the movements of his fingers, the dome began to shrink. The contracting barrier compressed space itself, putting pressure on Hydemary with the intent of obliterating her.

The homunculus boy was indeed a master of barrier magicka. This in particular was an activated-type constriction barrier. Not even high-penetration spells were likely to breach it from the inside.

So how would Hydemary deal with it? Suimei simply observed as he kept himself on guard.

Hydemary suddenly pulled something from her breast pocket. It was a favored magickal item of hers, a pack of cards. She opened it and artlessly scattered the playing cards within around her. Then...

“Wirbelwind!”

[Whirlwind!]

As the barrier contracted, Hydemary used wind magicka to blow her cards in every direction. They flew this way and that, plastering the inside of the dome. And just when they were all in place...

“Kartensoldaten, greift an!”

[Card soldiers, attack!]

She let loose her next chant. Under its influence, the cards began transforming. They grew larger, sprouting gloved arms and booted legs as they did. They were just like the card soldiers from *Alice in Wonderland*. Some carried swords, some spears, and some even shields. They all grappled with the barrier at once, bravely volunteering their bodies to suppress the contraction.

“Hahaha! Do you really think you can stop my barrier with such simple means? This is beyond foolish.”

“I don’t think this’ll stop it either.”

“Wha?!”

Hydemary’s mana swelled and flooded the area as if to drown out the boy’s voice. The air crackled alive with electricity, the sound of which was almost lost among the creaking of the building and its furnishings under Hydemary’s pressure from within the barrier. The mana pouring out of her turned into a torrent of light, which ascended to the ceiling of the dome like a rising dragon.

“Th-That mana...”

“You won’t last if this is all it takes to surprise you!”

Hydemary shouted at the boy, who was clearly shaken by the manifestation of her mana. She then pulled a single book out of thin air.

“A grimoire? No, that’s not...”

“No, it’s nothing that impressive. It’s just a picture book.”

With that, Hydemary gave the boy a flash of the cover. It was indeed a well-worn picture book decorated with an illustration on the front under its English title. The letters were written in a large, easy to read font. It was unmistakably a children’s book, and appeared to be nothing more. It held no value as a magicka item. It was, as Hydemary said, simply a picture book

“*Through the Looking-Glass?*”

“Yup. This was the first thing my father ever gave me. Just a well-loved book.”

“Hmph. And what’re you going to do with that?”

“What am I going to do, you ask? I’m a magician, aren’t I? There’s only one thing to do.”

“That can’t possibly be a magickal item. Like you can do anything with that...”

“Oh, I can. And I will. After all, my magicka is...”

Indeed, Hydemary’s magicka was origin magicka.

In general, spells were formalized combinations of actions such as primitive prayers and wishes. The exact actions required by a particular spell were determined by its system of magicka, but they were constants. Said actions were fixed, and not something an individual caster could alter.

Except for Hydemary, that is. The actions required for her spells could be completed using whatever process she wished, readily bringing about the exact result she intended as long as the input matched the output. Essentially, as long as she supplied the correct amount of mana to warrant it, she could wreak anything she

desired.

Hydemary Alzbayne's magicka was known as Die Kleine Spielzeugkiste, or "The Little Toybox." It was magicka that used anything considered a child's toy as a medium to manifest her dreams. As for the toys children used to stave off boredom... Dolls, stuffed animals, playing cards, and magic sets were all fair game to her. Even picture books.

And so, holding her picture book open in one hand, Hydemary began chanting her spell.

"'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe."

It was a nonsense poem known around the world, famously explained to Alice by Humpty Dumpty, that told the story of a bewildering monster slain with the power of a magical sword.

The pages of Hydemary's picture book flipped wildly as she channeled her magicka through it. Pale lightning sparked from it, forming a glowing beam. Hydemary reached into the beam with her right hand, projecting her mana into the book and pulling a blade from it in return.



“He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought...
One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!”

But it wasn’t just any blade that Hydemary drew from her book and thrust at the blond boy.

“Do you think that sword could possibly break my barrier?!” he asked in disbelief.

“Vorpal Sword: Vanity Cutter!”

It was a blade that cut through all magicka and nonsense with the power of truth. As if in demonstration, Hydemary sliced into the contracting barrier with aplomb.

“This is the magicka-slaying sword. All falsehoods are fated to be cut down by it.”

And just like that, her vorpal blade rent asunder the boy’s barrier, reducing it to nothing before it could accomplish anything.



Things ended quickly after that. The blond boy likely never thought his contracting barrier would be broken, and was summarily swarmed by the card soldiers who escaped it. He hardly put up a fight and was swiftly rendered unconscious.

“That was unexpectedly lame,” Hydemary frumped.

“Well, he *was* up against you...” Suimei replied nonchalantly.

The two homunculi were fundamentally on different levels to begin with. Hydemary was the magnum opus of the famous Doll Master, while the blond boy—though capable of great things—possessed so little ability that his creator had dismissed him.

In that sense, this result was inevitable. It should have been obvious from the start. It was actually quite an achievement that he’d temporarily captured Hydemary, but in an outright magicka battle, the scales were hopelessly tipped in her favor.

Suimei was now looking down at the collapsed boy. With all the intel he’d gathered, he had a grasp of the boy’s situation. After being created as part of a certain alchemist’s experiment, he was dismissed and left to wander the world. It was in doing so that he’d encountered Saix Ruger, and the rest was now history.

"I feel kinda bad for him... Thrown away, tricked, and this was what awaited him in the end," Suimei said with a sigh.

"Agreed."

"But, you know, at the end of the day, why was he so eager to take on more than he could handle? If he wants to accomplish something, what's wrong with doing a little bit at a time?"

Suimei casually threw that out, and in an unusual turn of events, Hydemary smiled.

"I'm sure... he wanted the person who created him to acknowledge him. He wanted to be accepted. That's why he tried to do something grand. To stand out and attract attention. Also... I get it."

"Get what?"

"This boy didn't have you. That's why he's been unable to live freely like I do."

Hydemary looked down at the blond boy too. Her tone was sympathetic, and her expression just a bit lonely.

"Suimei-kun... Could I be a little selfish?"

"What are you thinking?"

"I don't want to hand this boy over to the Thousand Nights Association."

"I don't particularly mind, but what exactly are you planning on doing instead?"

Suimei questioned Hydemary in a slightly strict tone. No matter how pitiful she found him, cutting him loose would only end with another incident. This wasn't something that could simply be overlooked. Someone needed to take responsibility, much the same way Suimei had sheltered Liliana.

"I'd like to send him to my father."

"Ah, so you'd like the meister to train him?"

"Mm. I think that'd be better."

"That sounds nice and all, but will he agree to it? This boy is a complete stranger to him."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. If he's reluctant, I just have to beg him."

"Why go that far?"

"Why? Is that something *you* need to ask?"

Hydemary paused there for a moment, but the next words out of her mouth were Suimei's own...

"To definitively save those who cannot be saved."

I see. In that case, of course she'd go this far.

“You don’t say, huh? Then you’d better lend him a proper hand. He’s going to need it.”

With that, Suimei picked up the unconscious blond boy. Now that they’d decided not to hand him over, a negotiation with the Thousand Nights Association awaited. The thought was exhausting to Suimei, but it was all worth it to support his disciple who’d taken her first steps to pursuing the Society’s ideals. It was a good feeling, and Suimei left the church with a smile and Hydemary proudly at his side. Outside they found the girls, the magicians they’d restrained, and representatives from the Thousand Nights Association who’d come to collect their targets all waiting for them.

Epilogue: How Many Snacks Is Appropriate?

After delivering the homunculus boy to Hydemary's father, Edgar Alzbayne, Suimei and company wrapped up their remaining business in Germany and returned to Japan. Once they were back, they saw to various preparations—including stocking up on all manner of things for Reiji and Mizuki—for their return to the other world. When the day arrived, however...

“Chocolate! Chocolate! Chocolate! Chocolate! Chocolate! Chocolate!”

“Chocolate! Chocolate! Chocolate! Chocolate! Chocolate! Chocolate!”

Suimei stood in the Yakagi estate garden with two beautiful girls charging at him while shouting about chocolate. One of them was Felmenia, who was carrying a cardboard box chock full of the stuff; and the other was Liliana, who was preciously hugging her stuffed penguin.

It seemed they were intent on returning home with a massive supply of chocolate in tow. Unable to conquer their lust for it here in the modern world, Felmenia had decided to take as much of it back with her as she could carry. If Suimei had tried to enforce a 300 yen limit on candy or something, he knew it would make his life a living hell. So, thinking better of it, he'd made certain concessions about the snack supply, but...

“That's still way too much, ain't it?”

Felmenia's arms were full with the cardboard box of chocolates, and stacked neat and high atop it were takeout boxes of cake. Just how much were she and Liliana planning on bringing? They could only take what would fit in the teleportation circle, so Suimei was hoping they would come to their senses on that front.

As for what Felmenia had to say for herself...

“But Suimei-dono, we must bring back souvenirs! I have a duty as a retainer to deliver these treats to Her Highness!”

And as for Liliana...

"It's impossible... to endure... without chocolate. I want to... at least have... some every few days."

Liliana apparently wanted her portion for herself, but her honesty in the matter and her sense of moderation were actually quite praiseworthy.

"We can only carry but so much. You guys are gonna have to cut down."

"This is as much as we *could* cut down!"

"We actually... prepared... a lot more."

Suimei insisted, but the girls just wouldn't relent. It was like he was losing ground with them by the word. But it was there that Lefille—shrewdly carrying a bottle of sake to take back to Rumeya—cut in.

"The two of you need to stop being so unreasonable with Suimei-kun already."

"But, but, but...!"

"Lefille, to us... this is a matter... of life and death."

Liliana looked to Lefille with grave eyes, and Lefille returned a gentle smile. Her smile, however, didn't indicate that she was on Suimei's side when it came to the chocolate. In fact...

"I know, Lily. But don't we now have a heartening ally in Lady Mary?"

She encouraged Liliana and Felmenia to solicit the help of their new comrade. Her interjection had seemed like a rebuke at first, yet things had taken a strange turn. No, in truth, this was inevitable. With snacks on the line, of course Lefille was on the girls' side. And to further their cause, they went running over to Hydemary.

"Mary-dono!"

"Hydemary... please say something... to him."

Naturally, Hydemary was on their side as well. With that, it was three... No, four against one.

"Suimei-kun, don't be stingy."

"Fine, alright already. Jeez."

And so, Suimei reluctantly caved in. An innocent cheer breaking out in celebration. Snacks, of all things, was one thing the girls wouldn't give up on. Felmenia was beaming as if their victory had only been a matter of course, and even Liliana was smiling happily.

Hydemary, however, approached Suimei as he got to work on

the magicka circle.

“Suimei-kun, you’re bringing souvenirs yourself, aren’t you? So what’s the big deal?”

“I’m only taking all this ’cause there’s a noisy brat waiting for me back over there who won’t shut up if I don’t. I’d never hear the end of it.”

As Suimei began slinging insults, Hatsumi—who was patiently waiting on the sidelines for preparations to wrap up—threw him a dirty look.

“Suimei, that’s a rather mean way to put it. Shall I inform her that you weren’t even sorry?”

“What? Who?”

“Anou-san, of course. I’m on her side here, you know? So if you don’t mind, I’ll be telling her everything. Including how reluctant you were.”

“Ugh...”

When Hatsumi pointed it out, Suimei was forced to reckon with the fact that both she and Mizuki were people he’d intentionally kept out of the loop about his identity as a magician. If she were to pick sides in such a situation, it was only obvious she would side with Mizuki. And Suimei was very, very sorry about that right now.

“Listen, I’m taking more than enough to make it up to her, okay?”

“You really are. That’s quite a bit of stuff you’ve got there.”

Suimei had packed plenty of Japanese ingredients that didn’t exist in the other world—rice, miso, soy sauce, all kinds of dashi, and even instant noodles. He’d picked up everything he could think of that would give Mizuki a little taste of home.

“I’ll be leaving the cooking once we get back to you, okay?”

“Of course. I’m itching to put my skills to use.”

Suimei thought the time and energy Hatsumi put into learning to cook would be better spent honing her blade, but to Hatsumi, the kitchen was just another battlefield. When joined by Felmenia, who was ordinarily in charge of the cooking, the two of them would undoubtedly achieve great things.

“Yo! Looks like you kids are about ready to head off.”

All of a sudden, a man’s voice called to the group from afar. Suimei turned to spot Kiyoshiro, along with his wife Yukio and his son Haseto, walking towards them. Hatsumi’s family had been taking care of Suimei and company during their stay in Japan, and

it seemed they'd come to see everyone off.

Kiyoshiro took a cursory glance at the teleportation circle before letting out a sigh of admiration.

"Huh... That's quite a few circles ya got there."

"You can tell?"

The more circles within a magicka circle, the more information it contained. The outer magicka circle was the teleportation spell proper, but altogether it was composed of seven smaller circles. It was like grand-class magicka and then some. As such, the amount of mana it consumed was nothing to be sneezed at. Fortunately, however, that wouldn't be an issue with several capable magicians on hand.

Ignoring the magicka circle, however, Yukio put her hand to her cheek and politely lamented the departure of their guests.

"How regrettable. It's been so lively around here lately."

"She's right. We've had my students gathered around for dinner, but this was a first for us. It was nice and refreshing."

Turning away from his aunt and uncle who were being rather nonchalant about the whole affair, Suimei looked to his cousin.

"To think I even had to tell you about it, Haseto..." he sighed.

"Hatsumi found out anyway, so the timing was pretty perfect," Kiyoshiro chimed in.

It was there that Haseto turned a complicated expression to Suimei, like he wasn't quite sure what to say.

"How do I even put it? I've always thought you were pretty mysterious, but I never dreamed you were like something straight out of a fantasy story."

"You sure aren't acting very surprised, though."

"Well, you know... Anyway, level with me. Just how strong *are* you?"

Haseto was brimming with curiosity, and Suimei answered as he always did.

"Aah, well, somewhere in the lower-mid—"

Or, at least, he started to. He only got a few words in before sharp gazes befell him from all directions.

"Suimei-kun, that part of you is a little..." Hydemary sighed.

"Can you stop lying to people already?" Hatsumi jeered.

"I think it's about time for you to cut that out. Don't you?" Lefille scolded.

Under fire from all three of them at once, Suimei was left

groaning at a loss for words. It was there that Kiyoshiro turned to his daughter.

“Hatsumi.”

His usual flippant attitude was nowhere to be seen. He was addressing her not just as her father, but as her instructor. Hatsumi turned to face him in kind, ever so slightly tense.

“Yes?”

“Go and end this.”

“Understood.”

Their parting words were brief, but that was enough for them. And once they were done, Yukio approached with a gentle smile.

“Hatsumi-san, be careful not to get sick. And don’t hurt yourself, okay?”

“That’s, well... Sure.”

Yukio’s slightly out-of-place comment left Hatsumi at a little bit of a loss for a response. She seemed to be more concerned about illness and injury than she was about the strength of any enemies.

“That goes for everyone else too. Please do take care of yourselves.”

With that, the rest of Suimei’s group gave her their thanks. Kiyoshiro then called out to his newest student.

“Hey, Lefille.”

“Yes, Grandmaster?”

“Once will do, but go see that swordsman you respect.”

“Very well. My time here was brief, but I cannot even begin to express my gratitude for your training.”

“You betcha. And hold on to that feeling. The moment you forget your gratitude for others, your sword will begin to show signs of arrogance.”

The ever-so-silly Kiyoshiro, every now and then, had something profound to say. But once all was said and done with Hatsumi’s family, they quietly returned to the Kuchiba residence.

“Now then, it’s about time we get going.”

Suimei walked over to the magicka circle to begin the ritual, when Hydemary suddenly stepped in with him.

“Mary...? What are you doing?”

“Isn’t that obvious? Or were you really going to leave me behind again?”

Her tone was extremely critical, but this was the first Suimei had heard of her desire to go with him.

"I mean, are you really sure about this?" he asked skeptically.

"Now *that's* Suimei-kun for you. Your denseness is downright terrifying. Have you ever heard of being too reserved?"

"Life is way harder over there than you think it is, you know? They don't have any of your favorite snacks."

"It's fine as long as I learn the teleportation spell myself."

"You're really something, you know? Expending such a massive amount of mana just to go buy sweets..."

"You still have to coach me. You said you would, so I expect you to follow through on that."

"Yeah, yeah. Cheer up already. I'll even give you a pat on the head."

"Do you really think you can coax me like that? Seriously... Could you not belittle me?"

"Is saying that while taking off your hat some kind of performance art?"

Indeed, Hydemary was holding her hat in one hand as she stepped toward Suimei and leaned forward. He looked down at her dubiously, but she only took this for reluctance.

"You're not going to pat me on the head after all? No one likes a man who goes back on his word."

"I swear... For a seven-year-old, you really never know when to shut up."

Though exasperated, Suimei gently patted Hydemary on the head. She was as expressionless as ever, making it difficult to tell whether she was pleased. But the fact that she let him continue certainly seemed to indicate so.



Meanwhile, however, the visitors from the other world and Hatsumi had been stunned into silence. They were all gawking at Suimei with befuddled looks on their faces.

“Hmm? What’s up?”

Unsure why everyone was suddenly staring at him, Suimei quizzically cocked his head to the side. A bewildered Felmenia spoke up on behalf of the group.

“Um, Suimei-dono, the seven-year-old you mentioned just now...”

Looking at all the confused girls in turn, it suddenly dawned on Suimei.

“Oh, come to think of it, we never told you, huh?”

“Hey, Suimei... Have you been keeping quiet about something extremely important again?”

“Er, well... It’s just that it’s only been seven years since Mary was created.”

Suimei plainly confessed the truth, feeling a little bad about forgetting to mention it sooner. What he said, however, left Lefille reeling in shock. She looked at him in simple disbelief.

“That can’t be. I mean, she’s far too tall and smart for that to be the case.”

“As I’ve been saying... that’s ’cause she’s a homunculus. They grow differently from normal humans.”

“I-Is that so...?”

Lefille’s head was still spinning, but Liliana’s lone eye shot wide open.

“Hydemary... is that... true?”

“Mhm. I’m seven.”

When Hydemary answered with an affirmative nod, Liliana froze. She stared up at the girl that she’d believed to be older than her in absolute silence. It seemed her brain was struggling to get a handle on the situation, but that was perfectly understandable. Hydemary had turned out to be half her age, after all. In absolute bafflement, she began mumbling to herself as she counted on her fingers.

But she wasn’t alone in this predicament.

“N-Now that is quite...”

“I-Isn’t this a rather serious development?”

Both Lefille and Felmenia were still equally bewildered. Hatsumi, however, looked to Hydemary with a blank expression.

“I thought we were about the same age...”

“You can just keep thinking of her that way,” Suimei replied on Hydemary’s behalf. “She’s seven years old, but that’s seven homunculus years. They don’t play by human rules. Kinda like how we think of dogs and cats, you know?”

“Stop right there, Suimei-kun,” Hydemary finally interjected. “Is that really what you think of me?”

“I mean, it was the only comparison I could think of.”

Nevertheless, it wasn’t a good analogy. Hydemary was rightfully glaring at him.

“Okay, well, uh... Let’s get going.”

“Hey! Suimei-kun, that’s inexcusable! Hey!”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. So let’s go already. Everyone, get in! We’re leaving.”

“Jeez, you... We’re going to settle this properly later, you hear?”

Hydemary stomped into the magicka circle with enough force that it was almost comical.

And so, shortly after that, Suimei clapped his hands together. As the pleasant sound lingered in the air, the magicka circle began overflowing with manalight.

“Dimensional connect.”

Suimei recited the keywords to activate the spell, and they were whisked away to another world... all without realizing that someone was watching from the shadows.

“Heehee! I knew I hadn’t seen him for a while, and here he’s stuck his neck into something that looks so very fun! Way! To! Go! Me! You sure know how to have fuuuuuuun, Suimei-kun! As your number one fan, it’s only right for me to take chase, right?! RIGHT?!”

An insane voice resounded through the Yakagi estate garden.

Side Story: The Magician and the Doll Princess

A boy let out a heavy sigh, which turned into white mist before vanishing. The chill that spread through his lungs was refreshing, but just when had it gotten so cold? Winter was still far away, but the temperature changed drastically the further up the mountain he climbed.

It was said that every thousand meters above sea level dropped the temperature by ten degrees. And with the fluctuating autumn weather, it wasn't all that strange for the mountain air to be quite chilly. But this intense cold was nothing to be sneezed at.

"Why did I have to get sent to a mountain like this right after arriving in Germany...?"

The boy idly complained to himself, standing directly above a fir forest as he looked up at the bright sunshine beaming through the clouds. He heaved another sigh, which looked not unlike the clouds overhead before it too vanished into the atmosphere.

On this day, modern magician Yakagi Suimei was deep in the mountains of Germany on the orders of Nettesheim, the leader of the Society. Now, speaking practically, anyone who self-identified as a "magician" was likely to get suspicious looks regardless of whether they were telling the truth or not. To most people, after all, magicians were something out of fiction.

Merlin, Morgana, Odin, Circe, the three witches from *Macbeth*... If one were to start listing all the examples, it would take forever. But if you asked ten different people, they would all tell you the same thing: "Magicians aren't real." That was common sense. All normal people knew about, at best, were stage magicians.

However, that didn't change the fact that magicians were indeed very, very real—even in the modern world overrun with science and technology. And they were just like the magicians of fiction that everyone thought of when they heard the word. They unraveled the mysteries and manipulated wondrous phenomena.

In fact, magicians had guided humanity with their extraordinary powers since antiquity, largely contributing to the world's prosperity. They facilitated all scholarly pursuits, beginning with natural philosophy, and it was no exaggeration to say that they'd built the foundation for the wonders of the world. However, in the modern era, their achievements were superseded by science and their existence had gradually been relegated to the pages of fiction since the days of Robert Boyle.

And so, in the present day and age, the mythical creatures known as magicians continued to pass down their knowledge of the mysteries in the shadows. One such creature was a boy from Japan, Society magician Yakagi Suimei.

Suimei came to a sudden stop. Just how long had it been since the mountain path disappeared? No matter how much he kept walking, all he could see around him was the same verdant scenery.

Scowling at the cold air, he took both a regular map and a star chart out of his bag and threw them on the ground. He then muttered a few strange words as he glanced up at the sky before taking another good look around him. When he did so, the two maps were now in a different spot on the ground from where he'd thrown them.

"Hmm... At least I'm not lost."

He was still going in the right direction. All he had to do to arrive at his destination was press forward. But in spite of that, all he could see in front of him was a thick, dark forest. The evergreens were packed together so tightly that visibility was grim.

A dark forest was hardly an obstacle for a magician like him, however. If he just used magicka to illuminate the path, he would reach his destination without issue. But rather than resorting to magicka, Suimei lazily pulled a flashlight out of his suit pocket.

"Hmm?"

Click, click...

The switch on the flashlight let out a futile cry. It was functionally useless.

"Well, crap. It's broken. Man, he really went all-out for me, didn't he?"

Indeed, the flashlight had been a birthday present from Suimei's best friend—something he'd given him right before leaving Japan this time. Suimei hadn't used it even once yet, but it had apparently died without ever giving him the chance to.

Suimei scratched the back of his head in a troubled manner, and then returned his birthday present to his suit pocket. Technological devices often malfunctioned in the hands of magicians. The more one steeped themselves in the mysteries, the more they separated themselves from science. Sometimes their very touch was enough to render devices that depended on it inert.

Such was the case with Suimei's flashlight, which had given up on him. But this wasn't an entirely new experience. Far from it. It wasn't that uncommon for the turnstiles or the automatic doors at the train station to give him grief.

Now, a flashlight was a relatively simple device. It couldn't really be called high-tech. But nevertheless, modern ones still used things such as organic electroluminescence, diodes, and the like, so they were far more advanced contraptions than they once used to be.

It was likely exactly that that had done Suimei's flashlight in. But even so, having something as simple as a flashlight break in his hands like this was a first. That meant there was a possibility something else was at play here. It was something people often heard about, or sometimes even experienced for themselves, at certain holy sites or haunted grounds. Cameras, lights, and radios would suddenly cease functioning.

According to magickal theory, electromagnetic waves had a nature that made them highly susceptible to the mystical. Electromagnetic waves were important in the world of mysteries as a wavelength of light, but they also held great significance in the sphere of science as part of the theory of universal eternity. That's why it was said that the closer something was to mystical theory, the harder it was for electromagnetic waves to function properly on a purely scientific basis—meaning there was a possibility that there was a mystical presence in the area so strong that it exerted a constant influence on any electronic device.

A barrier, huh?

Indeed, the abnormal cold of the forest wasn't solely because of the high altitude. Its bleak darkness wasn't just because of the tree cover and clouds overhead, either. And, very similarly, Suimei's flashlight hadn't broken just because he was a magician.

In short, there was a barrier here that ensured anyone who entered the forest unwelcomed would lose their way. Along with the unnatural chill and looming darkness that threatened to

swallow you whole, it was more than enough to deter any ordinary intruders.

Suimei could palpably sense an invisible boundary right in front of him. But even so, he didn't hesitate to step forth. The sensation of his own footsteps was unreliable at this point. He couldn't feel the branches and leaves he was treading upon, let alone the firm earth under them. Unlike regular darkness, it felt like he'd stepped into a physical night—one that clung to his skin like moisture. Walking into it was like sinking into a black sea. It was enough to send any normal person running the other way, but Suimei pressed onward confidently.

Eventually emerging on the other side of the treeline, a blinding light assaulted Suimei. When he could finally see through the afterimage burned into the back of his eyes, a paved path opened up before him. It was so neatly laid and inviting that it made him doubt the bleak journey he'd been through to get to this point.

"I guess my destination is at the end of this path."

He could vaguely see the silhouette of a building up ahead. Surely that was his objective. The mission that the leader had given him this time around was a rather odd one.

"Congratulations. Now that you're a high grand class magician, we've decided to grant you an assistant. An old friend of mine lives where I'll be sending you. I'd like you to go pick up your assistant from him."

Suimei's face had twisted up quite severely upon hearing that. The leader of the Society, Nettesheim, was known for pushing unreasonable demands on others with an innocent smile. Virtually everything out of his mouth begged a quip back.

In any event, it was quite common for magicians to sequester themselves away in remote locations. Be it in the middle of the mountains or on a completely isolated island—the more secluded, the better. Suimei's only suspicion here was that this place wasn't recorded on the ancient map at Society HQ.

The ancient map was an artifact that accurately reflected changes to the landscape in real time. Suimei believed it to be definite and absolute, yet for some reason... this location wasn't marked on it. When he'd asked the leader about it, the only answer he'd gotten was Nettesheim's trademark smile and the ominous words, "You'll figure it out when you get there."

This place, however, was where an old friend of Nettesheim's

lived. “Old friend” had been Nettesheim’s own words, which Suimei regarded as highly suspicious. The leader of the Society, you see, called anyone and everyone who shared his ideals a friend. Those who adored him, those who chased after him, those who blindly idolized him... They were all friends to him without exception.

So was the person waiting for Suimei *truly* Nettesheim’s friend? Was it an old disciple? A follower who revered him like a god? Suimei could only wonder.

That wasn’t the only thing that struck him as odd about this mission, however. More importantly, Nettesheim had specifically told Suimei to go and “pick up” his assistant. That made it sound like said assistant was a familiar. Suimei didn’t possess the abilities or mana to contract a familiar, and Nettesheim knew that full well.

Perhaps it was one that could be summoned only when needed, but fundamentally, Suimei had no interest in having a familiar standing at the ready at all times. This was also something that Nettesheim knew full well.

So why, exactly, had Nettesheim implied what he did? What was the meaning behind his choice of words? Suimei pondered this as he walked, but the end of the stone path came before an answer ever did.

“So this is...”

A large, old, Neo-Renaissance-style house stood before him. The sun was currently hiding behind the clouds, and the walls stretching from the front gate reflected its dull light. Because of that, the entire area appeared to be awash in grayscale, giving it a rather curious aesthetic.

Nevertheless, Suimei approached the gate. It was a large, majestic structure that matched the size and splendor of the manor. It was made of wrought steel that looked like it had been burned pitch black, and it was adorned with cogwheels, pendulums, and such as though it had been modeled after the inner workings of a clock or some other simple machine.

Suimei used the knocker on the gate and a pleasant, metallic ringing sound reverberated straight towards the door of the house. The old magician’s estate naturally had a mysterious air to it, including the clearly magickal knocker.

It wasn’t long before the front door of the house creaked open, peeling away at the darkness inside. The intervening sunlight revealed a girl in a lovely apron dress with light brown hair flowing

down her back. She appeared to be younger than Suimei based on her height and features, but her somewhat transparent expression seemed quite cold.

She approached the gate, picked up the hem of her dress, and elegantly curtsied. Suimei politely began to introduce himself in return, but...

“I’m—”

“Yakagi Suimei of the Society, right? We’ve been expecting you.”

“I see.”

The girl touched the gate and a metallic sound rang out like the gears of a clock had suddenly engaged. It was followed by ticking as the zero gears around the heavy steel gate began revolving as it swung open, dragging itself across the ground.

The noise of it all resounded through the mountains. Birds scattered from distant trees, the sound of their flapping wings echoing back toward the estate. But as the cacophony died down and the gate finished opening, the girl held her hand out towards the manor in a welcoming gesture.

“My father is waiting inside. Please come this way.”

There, Suimei looked the girl in the eyes.

“Can I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“Where are we?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean... whose house is this?”

“It couldn’t be... Were you not informed?”

Her surprise was perfectly natural. After all, it was only normal for someone to know where they were going before they made the trip there.

“I’m sorry. Our leader can be quite impish,” Suimei confessed dejectedly.

“I see,” the girl sighed in understanding. “Allow me to guide you, then. This is the Alzbayne Clockwork Doll Workshop.”

“Alzbayne? So this is...”

It was the workshop of the elusive puppeteer. Suimei took another look at the estate. As the sun peeked through the clouds, the red of the previously grayscale manor seemed to come back to life.



“Puppeteer” was the proper title for magicians who used or created puppets and dolls. There were many puppeteers throughout the ages, but only a single one had ever earned the prestige of being called the Doll Master by the Thousand Nights Association. That man was none other than Edgar Alzbayne.

It was said that he’d earned the name because of the masterful quality of his work. The dolls made by his hands were without peer. No puppeteer could surpass him. Moreover, the dolls created in his workshop every few years always accomplished great things with the masters they were entrusted to.

And so his reputation as the Doll Master had persisted for over a hundred years. Suimei quietly recalled all the stories he’d ever heard about Alzbayne as he and passed through the majestic front gate of his estate. He then followed the girl up to the manor and into the dimly-lit entrance hall.

Suimei took a look around, somewhat overwhelmed by the majestic double staircase before him. Inside the manor was decorated with brand new-looking furniture that belied its aged exterior. He could tell how scrupulously maintained the place was at a glance.

All seemed to be in perfect order except for the chandelier directly overhead, which only emitted a gloomy light. Its dim, colored glass bulbs—coated in mana—were restricting their shine, making it difficult to really see the bisque dolls that sat atop the furniture around the room. Suimei wanted to get a better look at them, seeing as how they were the creations of the famed Edgar Alzbayne, but...

Suddenly, the girl turned around to look at Suimei, who had stopped in his tracks. She then glanced up at the ceiling where he had just been looking.

“What’s the matter?” he asked her.

“Suimei-sama, a strong light reveals things that one does not wish others to see. Maidens especially dislike such scrutinizing gazes from a gentleman.”

“Maidens...?”

Suimei muttered to himself in confusion. It seemed at first that she was begging consideration for herself, but she’d spoken in the plural. Suimei was baffled as to who she really meant, and furrowed

his brow accordingly. Seeing this, the girl lowered casually glanced over to one of the bisque dolls.

“Ah, you meant them...”

“Yes. As such, if you care to admire their looks, they’d much prefer it if you did so in this lighting.”

I get it. All the dolls here are treated as if they’re alive.

“Well, I suppose it’s impolite to stare, isn’t it?”

“You’re ever so considerate, Suimei-sama.”

With that, the girl quietly began walking again. After ascending the double staircase, they came out into a hallway lined with a long, red Persian rug and illuminated with a much warmer light. Proceeding forward, the girl showed Suimei to a room at the end of the hall. She then stood to the side of it and bowed.

“Here?” Suimei asked.

“Yes. The master awaits you inside,” the girl replied.

By “the master,” she meant her father—Edgar Alzbayne. Suimei gulped nervously.

“Suimei-sama, I bid you be at ease.”

“I’ll try, but...”

He was about to meet the famed Doll Master. He couldn’t relax even if he wanted to. He flashed an embarrassed smile instead as the girl turned toward the door.

“Father, I’ve brought your guest from the Society.”

“Come in.”

A deep voice came from the other side of the door. It carried a weight to it almost like that of an aged tree.

The girl then opened the door, revealing an old gentleman sitting on a sofa within. He wore a stylish monocle and vest. Suimei’s first impression was that of a dour-looking sculpture, such was the heavy atmosphere about him. This was the master of the house and the meister of the dolls created in this workshop. Suimei walked up behind the empty sofa sitting across from him and bowed.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I have come here at the request of Nettesheim, leader of the Society. My name is Yakagi Suimei.”

“I’m Edgar Alzbayne. From what I hear, I’ve put quite the burden on you.”

“Hardly.”

Suimei bowed once more, and perhaps finding something

amusing about this, Edgar's stiff, eccentric expression crumbled ever so slightly.

"Now, as for introductions, the young lady who showed you here is one of my daughters..."

"My name is Annaliese. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Oh, uh, nice to meet you."

Suimei turned around to reply to Annaliese, and as he turned back towards Edgar, a frame on the wall caught his eye. It held a monochrome picture of several people, but the face of the man in the middle was blacked out. Suimei couldn't see who it was, even though everyone else in the picture was clearly visible. He stared at the picture in puzzlement for a moment before seeming to realize who the blacked-out face belonged to. Seeing this, Edgar spoke up in disappointment.

"Seeing his picture nowadays would make anybody scowl."

"So that really is...?"

Suimei looked to Edgar, who silently nodded. Suimei then glanced back at the picture. Indeed, in the center of it was one of the most notorious figures of all history. It was because of him that raising one's right hand the wrong way was illegal here in Germany.

The fact that Edgar had his picture on the wall, and his disappointment at his mention, seemed to indicate a personal connection. Suimei questioned Edgar with a raised eyebrow, to which he nodded.

"Meister, what kind of person was he?"

"What kind of person...? I can't really give a clear answer to that."

Suimei furrowed his brow at this answer. Edgar then looked up at the picture as if reminiscing about the past, and fluently explained himself.

"Wolf sometimes had quite a complex, like he was searching for his own path... But just when you started to think that about him, he was brimming with the confidence to guide others who seemed to be lost. Even I don't know whether he switched back and forth between the two, or whether he simply changed over time. It was entirely possible that he was always searching for who he was himself. But I admit that I was as enchanted with him as everyone else was at the time."

Edgar spoke almost nostalgically about the man in question,

who was indeed said to have enchanted many. He seized the hearts of the people with his grand speeches and gained many allies that way. However, after coming into political power, he used his charisma for ill and brought misery to the world. It was such a terrible time that the scars of it were still fresh, even seventy years later.

“Were you a comrade of his?” Suimei asked.

“That’s right,” Edgar acknowledged.

“Until the end, or...?”

“No, we parted ways before that. In the end, he was unable to oppose the professor’s spell. That’s why I had no choice but to leave.”

“..”

During the Second World War, there were multiple stages where magicians fought each other behind the scenes. Of them, it was said that the battles in Germany, Italy, England, Russia, Hong Kong, and Manchuria were the fiercest. The man sitting before Suimei now had likely been caught in that maelstrom of fighting.

Edgar flung the Reichsmark coin that he’d been playing with in his hand over to his desk as if to say that was enough talk of his past. As it finished spinning around and came to a stop, he cut to the chase.

“I heard that someone tied to me by fate would be coming, but I never expected you to be that man’s son. You look just like Kazamitsu did when he was young.”

“You knew my father?”

“I was harassed by him two or three times when he was a child.”

Edgar’s mouth curled in amusement. Suimei had heard that his father was quite the rascal when he was his age, and this seemed to have something to do with that.

“I’m sorry to hear about Kazamitsu. You have my condolences.”

“Thank you.”

“Honestly, it’s almost hard to hear you be so courteous when you’re his spitting image.”

“You’ll... simply have to get used to it.”

“That’s more like it.”

Edgar flashed a bold smile, and Suimei took the opportunity to ask about what had been bothering him all the way here.

“Meister, I’ve heard from our leader that you are an old friend

of his.”

“So Lord Nettesheim is still saying things like that...” Edgar replied with a sigh.

That was about the answer Suimei had expected. It seemed Edgar wasn’t a personal friend of Nettesheim’s after all. Considering how old Nettesheim was and when Edgar had risen to prominence, it didn’t add up anyway.

“So, Suimei, did Lord Nettesheim tell you why he sent you here?”

“He only told me to come pick up an assistant.”

“Well, that’s one way of putting it.”

Edgar nodded, seemingly having expected this. The matter of “picking up” an assistant, however, was the other thing Suimei had puzzled over on his way here... So why did Edgar seem so unsurprised at the phrasing? The furrow in Suimei’s brow grew deeper.

“You look like you don’t understand what’s happening here.”

“I can’t say that I do. There’s a lot that doesn’t make sense to me.”

“It certainly isn’t something that Lord Nettesheim would normally say. Long ago, when I was about your age, I showed Lord Nettesheim the first doll I created. Which was far inferior to the children we make these days, mind you.” Edgar paused and looked up at the ceiling before continuing, “But at the time, Lord Nettesheim... Well, his attitude was as gentle as always, but he treated it like an object. Back then, just like now, my goal was to create a living doll. So that was quite vexing to me.”

“He said something like that...?”

Nettesheim had denounced the handiwork of the famous Doll Master as a mere object—an insult beyond any sense of strictness.

“Thinking back on it, that was a reprimand from Lord Nettesheim. I ran away from my mentor to his side. It was nothing but arrogance on my part. At the time, I thought I could dominate all within my grasp. So his choice of words here is a reminder of that time—both an instruction and warning from Lord Nettesheim to judge myself at all times and to put my heart into it,” Edgar said with a smile, seemingly pleased at the message. “Now, we’ve gotten off track.”

“Oh, certainly not. This has been most interesting,” Suimei replied politely. “However, you mentioned children earlier. Does

that mean...”

“Yes. I am also a resident of this estate,” Annaliese answered with an elegant curtsy.

In other words, she too was one of Edgar’s creations. However, that being the case, there had to be a source of mana to power her. Dolls weren’t capable of moving on their own, yet this girl seemed to be moving without a puppeteer to manipulate her. The only thing Suimei could think of was that she’d been charged with mysticism at the time of her creation, making her capable of generating mana on her own even without a caster. This girl must be a standalone doll, and Suimei’s eyes sparkled with awe and respect upon arriving at that answer.

“My wife and I consider pretty much all the dolls of this estate our children.”

Edgar glanced over toward his desk, on top of which sat a picture of a young man and woman. The man looked like a more youthful Edgar, while the woman had features that resembled Annaliese’s.

“My wife was unable to bear children, you see. This was the only way we could leave something behind.”

“So the assistant you’re sending to the Society is...”

“One of my daughters, yes.”

There, Annaliese put her hand to her cheek in a troubled manner.

“But she was raised to be the most selfish of us all. I wonder if it’s because she’s the youngest...?” she mused.

“She’s still young. Everyone starts life that way. She’ll be learning from now on,” Edgar clarified.

“So this daughter... She isn’t independent as a magician yet?” Suimei asked.

“That’s right. And so you’ve been selected to provide her with guidance while she serves as your assistant,” Edgar explained.

“But I’m also still not—” Suimei started to protest.

“There’s no need to be so humble, Suimei-sama,” Annaliese cut in. “You’re an extraordinary magician who rid the world of a red dragon. You are far from inexperienced.”

“But that’s not really something I did on my own...”

It was true that Suimei hadn’t defeated the dragon alone. It was a victory only made possible with the hard work of several magicians who risked their lives to accomplish it. Suimei had

contributed, certainly, but he didn't think that made him qualified to instruct anyone else in the ways of magicka. Even as a high grand class magician, taking on a disciple required remarkable leadership and experience. And Suimei, who'd only been a magician for ten years all told, believed he was far too green for the job.

"Suimei, you'll be working on being able to take a proper disciple. Understood? You can think of this as a rehearsal until you're ready to teach a disciple magicka from scratch."

"Is it really alright for *me* to be doing this?"

"It's quite fine. You are Kazamitsu's son, after all."

"..."

Suimei scratched the back of his head shyly at that comment. Hearing such praise in his father's name made him feel somewhat bashful.

"Also, about the girl you'll be taking in... She's unique among her sisters," Edgar continued.

"How so?" Suimei asked.

"She was born from a flask," Annaliese answered.

That phrase struck a chord with Suimei.

"You mean she's a homunculus?" he asked.

"My wife came up with the theory before she died. And now that my techniques have finally caught up, I was blessed with the opportunity to create that girl."

"I see... But for your techniques to 'finally catch up'? That's rather..."

Edgar's story was outright astonishing. For the fabled Doll Master to chase a theory... It must have been some theory. Just how well-made was this daughter of his? Suimei couldn't even begin to guess.

"I'm still just a puppeteer. I had fairly extensive knowledge of alchemy, but my wife was the best of her time."

"Meaning someone has surpassed her now?"

"Lord Nicolas is probably the only one. But even he was overtaken by her in her day."

Edgar's expression remained stiff as he spoke fondly of his wife. It was rather frightening to think anyone had ever overtaken the monster professor. But putting that aside, Edgar turned to Annaliese.

"Well then, Ann..."

"Yes. Suimei-sama, right this way, please."

Annaliese, who was standing at Edgar's side, walked over to the door and bowed to Suimei. It seemed she was going to guide him the rest of the way too. After giving Edgar a light bow, Suimei followed after her once more.



When meeting someone for the first time in their own home, it was customary to meet in a reception room of some sort. Yet even though Suimei was completely new to the Alzbayne family and residence, he was being shown immediately to Edgar's youngest daughter's bedroom. Edgar was Suimei's senior by both age and rank, but this was still a somewhat improper way to treat a magician who'd come as an envoy of Nettesheim. Nevertheless, Suimei obliged as these were extraordinary circumstances.

"Homunculus." The term was generally used to identify the artificial lifeforms created with alchemy to prove the theory behind the product of the Lapis Philosophorum. They were capable of human speech the moment they were born and naturally possessed vast knowledge. However, on the other hand, their small bodies were said to be so fragile that they couldn't survive outside the flasks they were created in.

In all likelihood, that was the very reason she hadn't revealed herself yet and why Suimei was now being escorted to her personal chambers. He and Annaliese eventually arrived at a room in the corner of the second floor and, unlike at Edgar's office, Annaliese stood to the side of the door and curtsied as if bidding Suimei to open it himself.

"This room belongs to our youngest sister, Hydemary. She's expecting you, Suimei-sama."

Suimei complied and put his hand on the doorknob, but he was curious as to why Annaliese was just standing there. He'd assumed she'd be coming with him like she had before, yet she showed no sign of doing so.

"Annaliese, are you not coming in?"

"My apologies, but we would like you to enter this room alone, Suimei-sama."

"That's fine... But can you tell me why?"

"You could say it's a selfish request of Hydemary's. If you would like to know more, you're welcome to ask her once you meet

her.”

Meaning this should all make sense once I'm inside?

“Understood.”

There had to be some sort of reason behind this roundabout meeting. But, urged on by Annaliese, Suimei opened the door and entered the room alone. The moment he did, a gentle fragrance tickled his nose like rosewood incense was burning somewhere. The aroma calmed his heart, but at the same time, it had a strange, impure effect like the ylang-ylang oils and Laoshan sandalwood incense witches often used as aphrodisiacs.

The room, however, was packed with classy, white furniture that appeared to have been imported from France. And sitting atop it—bed, chairs, and all— were bisque dolls. The room was otherwise decorated with floral patterns and white accents, giving it the impression it belonged to a princess or some other noble lady. But nowhere among all the high-class decor and furnishings could Suimei spot anything that even resembled a homunculus's flask. He looked down at the floor and let out a sigh through his teeth as he tried to get a grasp of the situation.

“What's going on?” he muttered to himself.

He then turned around and reached for the door, intent to ask Annaliese about all this. But...

“Huh?” he uttered in disbelief.

For when he twisted the doorknob, the door wouldn't budge an inch.

“Hey! The door's locked! What's the meaning of this?!”

Even as he struck the door, no answer came from the other side. As his distraught voice echoed through the room, however, his trained magician eyes realized that a barrier was being deployed. The doorknob sank into the door, and the distinction between the door and the wall gradually vanished.

I'm trapped.

The moment he realized that, mana suddenly began building up behind him. There didn't seem to be anyone in the room, but Suimei considered the welling mana enough to be a threat. Just where was the owner of this room hiding? Or was this mana something else entirely? Suimei narrowed his gaze and carefully scrutinized his surroundings.

From what he could see, the dolls decorating the pretentious room were what really stood out. He'd learned just earlier that

almost all the dolls of the house were Edgar's personal creations, and after witnessing Annaliese, he could only assume they were the source of the mana. Yet in spite of that, he couldn't actually detect any mana coming from them.

It was a puzzle for sure, but Suimei didn't have much time to think it out. Because all of a sudden...

"Los geht's."

[Here we go.]

"!"

A woman's flat voice resounded through the room. At her signal, magicka circles took shape around several of the dolls like belts, and they began moving like awkward marionettes. It was like they were unused to being alive. They curiously moved their arms and their legs, then twisted their bodies about. But when they seemed to have adjusted, they suddenly all leaped towards Suimei at once.

"Ugh!"

Suimei artlessly swung his arm and mowed down the dolls with his mana. The dolls were successfully repelled, but the recoil sent Suimei back into the wall. Without giving him a moment's rest, the same flat voice spoke up once more.

"Jetzt kommen, mein niedlicher Teddybär."

[Now come, my cute teddy bear.]

The woman's strange, unaffected tone had a mystical air to it. What she said was far too ridiculous to be a chant, but there was no mistaking that's exactly what it was. As proof, a teddy bear appeared midair the moment the words left her mouth. It was a rather cute stuffed animal that didn't appear to pose any sort of threat, but the magicka that had created it was another story. It didn't appear to belong to any known system, leading Suimei to believe it was origin magicka. As such, Suimei thrust out his left hand to repel it with strike magicka, but...

"Fass!"

[Take hold!]

"What?!"

The teddy bear seized Suimei's hand with surprisingly deft movements. And when it did, an unbelievable weight assaulted his arm.

Urgh! This is... a magickal shackle?

Was the teddy bear itself constructed using a curse? Suimei was

unable to shake it off, and mana was no longer flowing to his left hand. The left side of his body was being pulled to the floor.

Suimei tried to dispel the curse, but as he did, the dolls rallied and steadily began closing in on him. Did they too have some sort of magickal effect like the teddy bear did? Or did they possess some other power altogether? Five dolls sidled up to Suimei. And perhaps as a portent of the next spell being put into play, a card case on a nearby table began clattering about.

However, the use of multiple magickas at once backfired on the caster. Suimei was able to pinpoint their location by identifying the source of their psychic chill and by tracing the movement of mana. They were right in front of him.

“There you are...”

Suimei ignored the teddy bear still attached to his left arm and thrust his right arm out to attack a doll atop the bed with strike magicka. A satisfying snap resounded through the room. However, the doll dressed up like a stage magician leaped out of the way, further back into the room.

“Oh my, you found me.”

The magician in question—who turned out to really be a young girl—stood up and addressed Suimei in the same flat, unaffected tone she’d cast her spells with. She’d apparently been hiding herself as a large doll all this time. She wore a tophat and tailcoat, and carried a magic wand just like a stage magician. Her long, black hair flowed down her back, and her pale skin had a beautiful porcelain sheen to it just like a doll’s.

She was taller than Annaliese, but shorter than Suimei. After twirling her wand around, she took off her hat with her left hand and lightly bowed to him. Not only was she dressed like a stage magician, she was carrying herself like one too.

“Good day to you. Are you the magician from the Society?” she said.

“That’s right. And I guess that makes you the assistant who’s supposed to come along with me,” Suimei asked indirectly.

“I wonder? That depends on you,” the girl replied mockingly.

Based on what Edgar had said earlier, this was most likely his youngest daughter—the homunculus. As such, Suimei had never expected her to be freely moving around outside of her flask, the shelter for her very life. It was a testament to the incredible and terrifying capabilities of both Edgar and his wife as alchemists.

But as Suimei calmly assessed her, Hydemary kept her mana deployed. It seemed she was hoping for a fight.

“Isn’t this a rude way to treat a guest?” Suimei asked dubiously.

“You’re supposed to be a pretty strong magician, aren’t you? Put in some effort to at least live up to your name, Evening Starfall.”

“Hmph.”

Suimei scoffed at the nickname someone or other had given him. He then began invoking his magicka, boldly staking his claim on the first move after their brief introductions.

“Invocato Augoeides, et sagitta!”

[Invoke Augoeides, and fire!]

Suimei fired down radiant rays of mana from small magicka circles overhead. As he did, the girl immediately deployed a rampart over her. His mana collided with her rampart, and sparks of manalight scattered everywhere, causing the room to flicker with blue and white. But in spite of the spectacle, the rays showed no signs of penetrating the rampart. And upon verifying that she had completely blocked Suimei’s attack, Hydemary spoke up in the same humorless fashion.

“Here’s payback.”

With that, she drew magicka circles overhead identical to the ones Suimei had just used. It seemed she was planning on using the same attack—a rather skillful maneuver. Was she able to read the spell from a single use? Or was she just imitating it?

“Defense shift, overlay.”

Suimei swept his hand through the air, first vertically downward and then horizontally from right to left as if making the sign of the cross. As he did, a hexagram manifested at his feet. It was part of a magicka circle designed to deploy like an enclosed sphere. The hexagram gave off a pale green glow and its outer circumference swiftly enveloped Suimei like a ball right before Hydemary’s mana rays crashed into it.

Once it was all over, Suimei quickly made his next move. He dashed forth as if to attack Hydemary from the flank, sharply changing course at a right angle. He accumulated mana in his right fist and invoked a spell, a rotating, belt-like magicka circle appearing around his wrist. The was Lagline Bells, the ultimate punch Suimei had learned from Lord Ozfield himself.

But it seemed the girl had now figured out what Suimei was up

to, and deployed a rampart to protect herself accordingly. However, the signature move of the magician known as Beatorex wouldn't be so easily blocked.

“Cross Sight...”

Hydemary's flat voice again resounded through the room. She'd managed to read the nature of the attack instantly and identify it in simple terms. By imitating an opponent's defensive magicka with a magicka circle in the palm of your hand, the weaknesses of said defensive magicka were exposed. This was a special technique indeed—magicka to break through magicka.

“Puppenspiel!”

[Puppet show!]

Hydemary raised her voice again, this time speaking what seemed to be a keyword. The instant Suimei's fist broke through her rampart, her body was swapped with that of a doll by a hair's breadth. Suimei's fist sent the doll flying, and he used the opportunity to scatter the other dolls who were still in action before jumping back.

Meanwhile, Hydemary seemed to have gotten away unscathed. The doll she'd switched in to act as her substitute also appeared to be quite sturdy; it wasn't even broken. Suimei couldn't really compare to the original developer of Lagline Bells, but it was still terrifying how Hydemary had handily managed to thwart the attack.

“Are you not going to show me the Golden Magnale?” she asked.

“That's not something I pull out for just anyone, okay?” he replied.

“How stingy. Are you really such a tightwad?”

“Shut it.”

Suimei brushed aside her insult with discontent. Hydemary had a composed expression and spoke frivolously as if this were all perfectly natural to her. But in reality, such indifference was a necessity for surviving the harsh world of magicka where fights between magicians were a common occurrence.

In any event, this girl really does live up to the Alzbayne name. Both her use of magicka and her response to mine are good. She has an advantage in that we're fighting in her room, but even so, that doesn't negate the fact that she's handling herself pretty well. She's strong. Nevertheless, however... She still has a weakness.

“Tanzen, tanzen. Werden ein Kreis.”

[Dance, dance. Become a circle.]

Another chant. No, this was a command. Immediately after she uttered those words, the dolls that were collapsed all around Suimei steadily rose from the ground, joined hands, and formed a circle. It was a dangerous omen. The formation of any circle in the world of magicka largely served one purpose—the foundation for a magicka circle. And indeed, it seemed the dolls were mimicking the outer circumference of one. Following the laws of magicka, mana flowed from each doll around the circle, unifying their mana in one large wave.

What manifested was a dreadful amount of power. It was easy to imagine that a manafield vibration would occur at this rate. Spells that could trigger such a phenomenon were extreme; they were a grade of mysticism higher than normal spells, which also gave way to triggering rank disparity extinction against lower-grade spells.

It wasn't clear what sort of mystery was being invoked, but Suimei's body could be scattered to the winds by the time he figured it out. Staring down that possibility, he acted accordingly.

“Meum desiderium est pro tempestas violentiae. O vente, abripe. Emittere clamorem desperationis. Causa delendo omnia pro me...”

[What I desire lies before the violence of the tempest. Oh wind, blow fiercely. Raise the screams of despair. For the sake of eradicating anything and everything before my eyes...]

As Suimei began his chant, the air around him began to stir like a draft was blowing. Paper and other light objects began flying across the room while all the curtains and lace doilies began flapping noisily. Before long, the air had condensed itself within Suimei's hand, which he'd thrust out towards the floor.

“I can't say I'm pleased you're using that kind of magicka,” Hydemary muttered.

“Says the girl who trapped me in here,” Suimei responded in kind.

Hydemary finally sounded a bit exasperated as she held her tophat in place. But Suimei didn't relent, and neither did she.

“Clauneck's Wind!”

Suimei unleashed Clauneck's Wind, a violent spell that contained a devil. As the compressed ball of air in Suimei's hand

exploded, a tremendous shockwave shot through the room, sending dolls and furniture alike all crashing into the walls. In the middle of all the commotion, a portion of the flowery tapestry behind the bed flipped up.

“...”

Suimei caught a glimpse of it out of the corner of his eye as he kept his attention focused on Hydemary. It was now her turn to make a move, and she swiftly charged at him. She had some distance to cover after being blown all the way back to the wall, but she closed in on Suimei in the blink of an eye. She was almost blindingly fast. It was somewhat unexpected considering the way she'd been moving thus far, but it seemed she was now intent on ending things in close combat. She dashed right at Suimei's side, thrusting her wand out towards him.

“Schockenstab!”

[Shock Wand!]

Suimei moved to evade, but he hadn't properly anticipated what was about to happen. The moment he thought electricity was about to shoot out of her wand, a dazzling current electrified their surroundings and began lifting objects into the air. And it didn't stop. Antique chairs, teacups, floral cushions... Anything and everything the current touched began flying around the room, sparking as it went. It was almost like the current was grabbing things and flailing them around like a sticky hand. Judging from this and everything else he'd seen so far, Suimei surmised that toys were the basis of her magicka just as a chair came flying at him. That was dangerous enough as it was, but the chair was now electrified too. Suimei tried to dodge it, but...

“Ugh!”

The teddy bear still holding on to his left hand was pulling on his arm as if attracted by the electricity.

Wait, it's not just heavy, but it can pull me around too?!

With his mobility restricted by the teddy bear, it was all Suimei could do to throw himself to the ground to dodge the chair. He would be vulnerable this way, but he had no other choice.

And as soon as he dove for it, the teddy bear began dragging him over to a part of the room that seemed to be free of electrified objects... making it the perfect place to send them all flying at him at once.

The term “standalone” popped into Suimei's head. The teddy

bear and the dolls were all moving on their own in accordance with their master's will, like cute little soldiers. Not that Suimei thought they were cute in the moment.

Since he couldn't move as he wanted to, he instead tried leaping in the direction the teddy bear was pulling him. Getting there sooner would give him more time to prepare for the incoming attack, and he immediately put up his defenses accordingly.

"Primum et secundum moenia, expansio localis!"

[First and second ramparts, local deployment!]

As the electrified toys and furniture came flying at Suimei, he deployed a magicka circle around his outthrust hand like a shield. This was an accumulated area-type barrier. The moment it took form, the magicka circle unleashed a golden radiance.

The brilliant fortress, the Golden Magnale, repelled every attack that came raining down on Suimei. The electrified objects were flung back at Hydemary or into the walls.

"So you finally showed me."

"Reluctantly, yes."

Now then, what to do?

Now that he'd used Clauneck's Wind and the Golden Magnale, the mystical entropy in the area was approaching its limit. Suimei now had to avoid using powerful magicka for fear of triggering the magicka melt phenomenon, but at the same time, lesser magicka didn't seem appropriate considering his opponent's capabilities.

No, hang on...

He'd seen it just moments ago—a glimpse of victory revealed by Clauneck's Wind. Taking a shot at seizing it, Suimei went on the attack. He once more gathered mana in his right hand and charged at Hydemary.

"That again? Don't you think it's a bit silly for a magician to charge straight in from the front?"

Suimei indeed looked like he was rushing into a fistfight with Hydemary, which she was rather critical of. It was a simplistic plan, and a most ineffectual one.

But rather than engaging Hydemary, Suimei thrust out his right hand like he was aiming to fire his next spell directly at the dresser in front of him. As he did, Hydemary's dolls grappled him.

"How unfortunate," she said. "What were you hoping to accomplish firing magicka over there? Were you aiming for a draw?"

“Sorry, but no. I win.”

“What are you—”

Suimei was still standing there, ready to fire at the mirror over the dresser. But it wasn't like the mirror was precious to Hydemary or anything. She couldn't figure out why he was smiling so confidently... until she looked up at the mirror for herself.

Reflected in the mirror was the flowery tapestry by the bed... Or rather, the enormous flask that it was hiding. And turning to face it, Suimei put his hand to his chin.

“That's your flask, right? Meaning this is checkmate.”

“Hmm... So your spell is the type that can be reflected in a mirror, and that charge was just a bluff?”

“Wasn't that obvious? It was an oversight on your part for not considering otherwise.”

Suimei's charge wasn't embellished or overacted to try and disguise the bluff. He'd been hoping Hydemary would misread him, but that wasn't exactly a novel trick.

“What? And you were ready to get struck down at the same time?”

“I can take a hit. I can just heal myself afterwards anyway. That said, it's not something I'd prefer to do if I don't have to.”

But you're not so easy, are you?

As Suimei indirectly praised Hydemary, she finally nodded in understanding.

“Not bad. Okay, I guess you pass for now.”

“Pass what?”

“I wanted to make sure that the person I'm to assist is worthy of me. I was testing you.”

“Testing me...? Is that the reason you had me come in alone?”

“Yup. You get it, right? All of a sudden I'm supposed to be the assistant of someone I've never met before. I can't just blindly agree to that. That's why I asked my father and sister for this opportunity.”

Hydemary explained herself rather matter-of-factly, to which Suimei grimaced in response.

“Well...”

He could at least understand where she was coming from. Magicians generally preferred to choose who they learned under and who they did their research with, after all. But even so, Suimei took issue with this sudden little “test” of Hydemary's. Just as

Annaliese had warned, she was certainly selfish.

But as Suimei stood there scrutinizing her, Hydemary took the opportunity to remove her tophat.

“My name is Hydemary Alzbayne. And you are?”

“Yakagi Suimei.”

“Suimei-kun, then. Hmm... Do people tend to tell you that you have a strange name?”

“How did you know?”

“I have most names up here in my head. Yours is quite uncommon even in Japan, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is.”

It was true that Hydemary contained vast knowledge within her. Upon their creation, homunculi were granted intelligence commensurate with the mysticism poured into them. And what Hydemary was showing off now was just a nugget of her natural wisdom. Realizing this, Suimei hummed in admiration.

“By the way, on a completely unrelated note...” Hydemary said next.

“What is it?” Suimei replied casually.

There, Hydemary suddenly looked rather sullen.

“Your face is rather plain, you know?”

“Excuse me?!”

“Oh my, how scary.”

Hydemary’s neutral expression didn’t at all indicate that she was actually scared. Instead, it rather seemed like she was teasing Suimei. She wrapped her arms around herself and stepped back, but her expression remained unchanged in spite of her theatrical behavior. Coming to the conclusion it was because she was a homunculus, Suimei pointed to his left hand and let out a grand sigh.

“Hey, can you get this thing off me already?”

“Oh, my teddy bear? He’s cute, isn’t he? I call him Beat-tan.”

“That’s not really...”

It was like Hydemary took every opportunity for a tangent, and she continued to boast as Suimei stared at her in exasperation.

“Isn’t he cute?”

“Looks pretty fiendish to me right now.”

“Whaaat?”

Suimei had half a mind to tell Hydemary off for acting this way under the circumstances. Contrary to its cute appearance, the teddy

bear served as a mana shackle to whatever it grasped. And whenever its prisoner tried to gather mana in the afflicted zone, the teddy bear only became heavier. It obstructed the flow of mana, but it couldn't be removed without mana. It was quite a dangerous trap to be caught in during combat.

Sensing Suimei's dissatisfaction, Hydemary released the teddy bear and held it up expectantly. It seemed that she really thought Suimei was going to tell her that it was cute. She was apparently more fixated on its appearance than its magicka effect.

"Is the magicka you use origin magicka?"

"That's right. I bet you're jealous, aren't you?"

Hydemary continued to boast, but Suimei narrowed his eyes at her.

"You sure are full of yourself."

"I *am* a genius, after all. Didn't you see my magicka?"

"Well..."

Hydemary was talented; that much was undeniable. Her magicka itself was eye-catching, and the way she could use multiple spells at once was an extremely high-level technique. Armed with both origin magicka and concurrent spellcasting, nobody could argue the fact that she was a genius. Moreover, she wasn't making such a claim out of conceit. It was more accurate to say that it was the genuine answer she'd come to after evaluating herself. Such was a homunculus's innocence.

The way she tested others still got on Suimei's nerves, but he was willing to put that aside for now. He had bigger fish to fry.

"Hey, how old are you?" he asked.

"Hmm, you want to know my age? I was created by my father six years ago."

"You're... six? Seriously?"

"Yup. Understand now?"

"Yeah. You're really something."

It was normal for homunculi to have tremendous knowledge of all things, but the way Hydemary could use magicka was another story. Being able to cast spells like that at only six years old... She was, indeed, a bona fide genius. That and the fact that she could move independently of her flask made it very, very clear she was no ordinary homunculus.

Hydemary began using magicka to repair her smashed-up room. She did so quickly, thoroughly, and without any strange quirks. Her

use of magicka was flawless, giving a better glimpse into the depth of her capabilities.

After she was done with the room, she beckoned her dolls and teddy bear over and began repairing—or rather, healing—them one by one. The dolls threw their arms in the air with joy, rubbed their cheeks against hers, and made other such affectionate displays as Hydemary lovingly patted each one. When she was at last finished with all the repairs, she took a seat at the table and beckoned Suimei towards the chair across from her.

“Take a seat. Let’s talk a bit.”

“...”

With that, Hydemary pulled some sweets and a teapot out of thin air. Keeping a keen eye on her, Suimei reluctantly pulled out the chair in front of him.



“What’s wrong? Take a seat.”

The owner of the room, Hydemary Alzbayne, once more urged Suimei to sit with her at the table where she was elegantly sipping tea from a cup she’d pulled out of nowhere. She was actually quite beautiful, although her outfit was something else.

Her long, black hair hung over the shoulders of her tailcoat, but she’d casually thrown her tophat and wand onto her bed. Her magician getup didn’t at all match the interior of the room, though the bisque dolls lying around shared her inorganic expression. It was all quite mismatched with her beguiling beauty. But even so, it felt like that was part of her charm. Like the discord was actually what brought everything into harmony.

After observing her for a moment, Suimei finally took the seat across from her.

“I’d rather you not be so cautious,” she said. “Just now was what you’d call a test. Something like a master certification exam. I have no further intention of harming you.”

“So? How’d I do on this mysterious little exam of yours?”

“I suppose you at least possess enough skill for me to acknowledge you.”

“Well, thanks, I guess,” Suimei replied cattily to her evaluation. “But you know I was told to take you with me, don’t you? Are you going to come along quietly?”

“Before that... there’s something I’d like to ask. Is that alright?”

“And this is why you wanted to talk?”

“Yup, exactly,” Hydemary replied indifferently. She then put down her teacup and cut to the chase: “I want to ask about you Society magicians. I hear you utilize a peculiar theory in your magicka.”

“You mean modern magicka theory?”

“Yes, that’s the one. It’s an outrageous theory that compounds multiple magickal systems together, right?”

“More or less.”

“But it’s not the same as using multiple systems at the same time, right?”

“You saw me use it just now. Do you really think it’s that kind of lowbrow magicka?”

Hydemary shook her head, implying that wasn’t what she’d thought at all. Just as she’d said, modern magicka theory mixed together magicka from different systems. For example, it could take rune magicka, which carved the compelling force of letters into objects to bring out their power, and mix it with a completely different system of magicka like Kabbalah numerology, which cataloged the phenomena of the world as formulas to be able to reproduce them. Even amongst magicians—who lived in the shadowy underbelly of the world—it was considered a rather heretical theory.

Speaking of the unusual, the magicka Hydemary used was rather unconventional as well. But setting that aside...

“And you’re all pursuing the ideals of your dear leader or whoever, right?”

“Yeah.”

As Suimei nodded, Hydemary cocked her head to the side like an innocent child.

“So what’s it all about?”

“You’ll figure it out as you go. You won’t be forced to do anything, and it’s not like I could explain it all here and now anyway.”

“That’s fair.”

Hydemary looked disinterested, but that was likely just because of her limited range of facial expressions. Moving on, however, she eventually came to her next question.

“Hey... Do you remember when you were first able to use

magicka?”

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

“I want to know what it’s like for you people when you awaken.”

“You’re asking how I felt when I could first use magicka?”

“I more so want to know about your eureka moment.”

“So the revelation I had when I arrived at that stage?”

“I was able to use magicka from the very beginning. I’m not aware of such qualia.”

Suimei now understood what she was asking, but had one particular question about her question.

“Couldn’t you just ask the meister? I feel like you’d get a better answer from a higher-ranking magician.”

“My father’s answer was vague.”

Hydemary took a sip from her teacup, seemingly disappointed with the answer she’d gotten. Suimei, however, understood it.

“The first time I could use magicka, huh...?”

That was because he didn’t actually remember the details of the moment all that well himself. While being shown magicka by his father, he’d touched upon mystical power. He studied the knowledge required to use magicka, and one day, he was able to use it just like his father did. That was all he profoundly remembered about it. He couldn’t pinpoint exactly when that day was or what he’d felt about it at the time. Looking back on it now, it seemed whatever had led him to use magicka had become inconsequential the moment he unlocked the secret.

The actual existence of mana was something he’d begun observing after he was able to use it. Even his mana furnace was something he’d created afterwards as well. They were skills that had stuck with him, even if their origin was vague. It was much like how someone never forgets the sense of balance required to ride a bike. Or how one can instinctively tell fortunes with tarot cards by tempering their senses. Or how sleight of hand is really just an extension of muscle memory. It was hard to pinpoint the exact moment one became capable of using such skills. But Suimei could say one thing for sure about learning magicka: it would be impossible if one never touched upon the mysteries.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. I just don’t really know. That’s all.”

“Is that really acceptable for someone pursuing the mysteries?”

Hydemary's tone was flat, but she seemed rather dubious about this point.

"Isn't it fine? Most everyone's like that. That's why the meister's answer was vague. It's difficult to express the sensation when theory and practice become results. I mean, every magician out there definitely goes through it, which is why nobody knows how to explain it in exact detail."

"Is that so...?"

That sensation, however, had escaped Hydemary who had been able to use magic from day one. She was practically born with the manual for everything in her head, and all she had to do to accomplish something was put that knowledge to use. That was part of what compromised her ability to earnestly display emotion.

Suddenly, Hydemary looked right at Suimei. He wasn't sure what the gesture signified. Her eyes were cold and gray. He couldn't perceive even a shred of passion in them, but they glinted faintly. She stared into Suimei's eyes for a long moment before seeming satisfied.

"Okay, very well. I'll come along with you," she said with a nod.

And with that, Suimei finally had her consent... although he wasn't sure what she'd made her decision based on.

"Suimei-kun, was it? Do be sure to treat me well like a lady."

"What are you implying?"

"Nothing. I just want to be treated properly."

Was that a personal request because she was a homunculus born from a flask? It seemed to express a desire not to be treated like an object.

"Ha-aaahh..."

Hydemary then let out an enormous yawn like a sleepy child. Seeing her absolute lack of self-restraint, Suimei was ready to mete some rather candid advice. Before he could, however, she rubbed her eyes and said something unexpected.

"I'm tired now, so I'm going to sleep."

"...What?"

She suddenly rose from her chair, leaving a bewildered Suimei sitting alone at the table.

"Goodnight."

She then defenselessly curled up on her bed and...

"Zzz..."

“H-Hey. What the hell’s with you...?”

What was done was done. Hydemary was asleep, and Suimei was absolutely stumped. But forced to accept the situation for what it was, he stood up and went to go for the door. The room, however, was still in its sealed state... meaning there was no door.

“...Hey, how exactly do I get out of here?”

In the end, Suimei had no choice but to wait there until Hydemary woke up. And when she did...

“Who... are you?”

“I’m gonna slug you, you little punk...”



“Have a nice god damn nap, did you?”

“Sorry, sorry.”

It wasn’t at all clear that Hydemary was actually sorry. Suimei shot a doubtful gaze her way while continuing to berate her internally. After he’d humored her and answered her questions, she’d suddenly decided it was naptime and crawled into bed. Worse yet, Suimei was still locked in her room and had no choice but to wait around until she woke up. And though she apologized, her expressionless face sure made it seem like she didn’t much care. Putting all that aside, Suimei let out a grand sigh.

When he and Hydemary eventually left her room, they found Annaliese standing outside just where she’d been when Suimei first went in. Upon spotting the two of them, she immediately turned to her younger sister. She apparently found fault with Hydemary’s wrinkled coat, and straightened it out for her like a meddlesome attendant.

“That took quite some time, didn’t it, Mary?”

“I got tired after talking to Suimei-kun.”

“What?! It can’t be... Did you go to sleep in front of our guest?!”

“Mm.”

“She sure did.”

Annaliese stared at her sister in wonderment, while Suimei begrudgingly nodded. Annaliese certainly hadn’t expected Hydemary to do something so impossibly rude. She was both astonished and dumbfounded by the news, but quickly pulled herself together and cleared her throat.

“I-In any case, father is waiting. Let’s go to his room.”

“Okaaaay.”

Hydemary gave her older sister a childish reply, and Suimei followed along behind them as they walked to Edgar’s office. Edgar closed the book he’d been reading to pass the time and turned to Hydemary.

“How did it go, Mary? Convinced?”

“Mm. I guess he passes, father.”

“I see.”

Seemingly satisfied with that answer, Edgar’s lips curved into a smile. Annaliese wasn’t so amused, however, and once again began chiding Hydemary.

“What a thing to say about Suimei-sama, Mary! Not to mention going to sleep... Just testing our guest was rude enough. You’ve really been quite a bother to him.”

Hydemary pouted in response to her older sister’s lecture. Edgar, on the other hand...

“Mary, you went to sleep?”

“Mm.”

“Don’t ‘mm’ me.”

“Sorry.”

Hydemary’s spiritless tone made it hard to perceive the sincerity in her apology, but it was indeed genuine. Her attitude was completely different from how she’d treated Suimei. This was her sister and father, after all. And they didn’t seem to pay her flat affect one mind.

Hydemary then hugged Annaliese like a spoiled child. She still had quite a sour look on her face, but she couldn’t quite keep it up with her little sister cuddling her so.

“Jeez...”

Still sounding a little vexed, she gently patted Hydemary’s head. It seemed she was quite used to this behavior, if not outright encouraging it.

Edgar, meanwhile, watched over the two of them for a fond moment before hardening his expression and turning to Suimei. His countenance was the same as it had been before, like that of an old fir tree—both incredibly weighty and dour.

“Sorry for putting you through so much, Suimei.”

“Climbing up a mountain, being tested, having to wait... You really did put me through the wringer here.”

“Come now. Irrationality is an indispensable part of being a

magician. Don't let it get to you."

Edgar's dour grin seemed to say this was payback, giving Suimei a glimpse of his unexpectedly mischievous side. He had a retort or two in mind, but considering his position, he resisted the urge to say anything. He choked back the rant burgeoning in his throat, where it settled in his sour stomach. Edgar appeared to see through all this, however, and only smirked more. This, if nothing else, Suimei would hold against his father.

In order to clear the air, Suimei changed the subject at the first opportunity.

"Say, uh, there were dolls in Hydemary's room. Were they...?" he started to ask.

"I'm the one who made those children," Hydemary cut in.

"Mary is the only one among us sisters capable of creating dolls herself," Annaliese explained.

"She's the only one? Ooh..."

Though Suimei asked, he immediately realized the answer for himself. Annaliese had said that Hydemary was the only one of the sisters who could make dolls, and Suimei already knew what was unique about Hydemary.

"Dolls can't create dolls themselves, can they?"

"That's how it goes. Of course, that's with respect to pouring life into them."

"I guess it'd be pretty outrageous if dolls could reproduce like that, huh?"

As Suimei murmured to himself half in astonishment, Hydemary looked to Annaliese.

"But don't you have the Thousand Albtraum yourself?"

"Heehee, you're so sweet."

Annaliese smiled affectionately at her little sister's praise. It seemed the stubborn little girl who never hesitated to call herself a genius had a soft spot for her beloved family. Annaliese was her sister, but she was almost like a mother to Hydemary.

As the two girls talked, Suimei turned and bowed to Edgar, signifying that his task here was complete.

"It's about time that I take my leave," he said politely.

"Then I guess I'm off as well," Hydemary added, parting with Annaliese.

"Mary," Edgar called to her.

"Yes, father?"

“Study well.”

“I will as long as there’s something for me to learn there.”

Edgar gently brushed off the overly confident little girl.

Annaliese then turned and elegantly bowed to Suimei.

“Suimei-sama, please take care of Mary.”

It went without saying that Hydemary then had a snide comment about who would really be taking care of whom.

Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. Gamei Hitsuji here.

I'm really sorry for making you all wait so very long this time around. There's... nothing really going on, but please forgive me.

In this volume, we have our long-awaited homecoming arc! The visitors from the other world are shocked with delight to see the modern world, and we get to meet a certain someone who's only been mentioned by name before now.

I'm sure there were scenes that made you go, "Huh? What?" I hope you enjoyed those too.

The number of characters is steadily multiplying, but the modern cast should be easy enough to remember by position, relationships, etc. Except for Mary-chan! She's important, so remember her! (Completely irrational request.)

Now then, allow me to express my gratitude to the chief editor Y-sama, the illustrator Yuunagi-sama, the designer cao-sama, and the proofreading company Oraido-sama. Thank you all very much.

Bonus Short Stories

The Red-Headed Guest

Felmenia was now quite used to hearing the doorbell at the modern-day Yakagi estate and knew exactly what it meant.

“Coming!”

She quickly headed over to the front entrance to receive the visitor and found a young man standing just on the other side of the door. He was casually dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, but had long, red hair and such beautiful features that he could easily be mistaken for a woman at a glance. What stood out the most, however, was the eyepatch that covered about a third of his face. It was perhaps more appropriate to call it a mask. Felmenia thought he was their only visitor at first, but upon taking a closer look, she spotted a girl with black hair standing behind him, practically nestled within his shadow.

The young man with the eyepatch took a look at Felmenia and raised a puzzled eyebrow. He then articulated his confusion in perfectly fluent Japanese.

“I dropped by because I heard Suimei had returned, but... Hmm...”

“Suimei-dono is indeed here, but...”

“What’s up, Felmenia-san?”

All of a sudden, Hydemary popped up from behind Felmenia. The visitor seemed to recognize her.

“Hydemary? Long time no see.”

“Oh, hello, Your Highness.”

Hydemary greeted him in her usual flat tone, and he gave a friendly nod in return.

“You know this man, Mary-dono?” Felmenia asked curiously.

“Mm,” Hydemary replied nonchalantly. “He’s a fan of Suimeikun’s.”

“He’s... what?”

“Pardon, but I’ll have to correct you there,” the young man

interjected.

“Oh yeah?” Hydemary asked, her head cutely cocked to the side.

“I’m not just any fan—I’m a huge fan.”

The young man sounded quite ridiculous, but he was nodding in a most earnest fashion. Felmenia then opened with a polite introduction, and the young man responded in kind.

“I’m Riselette.”

“Pardon me... but is that not a woman’s name?”

“Haha, I get that a lot. But I assure you that I’m a man.”

The young man with the eyepatch—Riselette, apparently—let out a merry laugh. Felmenia was charmed by his sociability, and she smiled as she opened the door for him.

“Now, we can’t have visitors standing around at the door. Do come in.”

“I don’t really mind chatting right here.”

“Nuh-uh. You’re a guest, after all, and guests need to be treated properly.”

Just like that, Hydemary jumped in and forcibly ushered Riselette and his female companion into the house like it was her own. When they arrived in the living room where Lefille and Liliana were sitting, Riselette took another look at Felmenia and burst into a hearty laugh.

“What can I say? The atmosphere here is wonderful. It’s nothing but women.”

“I know, right? Seriously...”

Hydemary huffed and pouted in irritation, leading Riselette into more cheerful laughter. And perhaps drawn by the sound of it, Suimei finally came downstairs.

“Oh, Your Highness... My apologies for being so out of touch. Did you come all the way here just to see me?”

“I got your letter from the courier and all, so I decided to swing by and get a look at your mug. I’m glad to find you in good spirits.”

“Likewise,” Suimei replied politely before turning to the maid accompanying Riselette. “It’s good to see you too, dame.”

“Of course, Suimei-sama. It has been quite some time.”

Suimei then returned his attention to Riselette and asked, “But how are things at home? It isn’t over yet, right?”

“The battle lines aren’t moving much. Besides, things will work out one way or another even without me there.”

“Is that really how it works...?”

As their little insider exchange wrapped up, Suimei realized that Riselette was looking at him with expectant eyes, eagerly awaiting an introduction.

“Everyone, meet His Highness. He’s the head of state of a nation that’s kinda in the middle of a big war.”

This information brought a furrow to Lefille’s brow.

“That was an extremely casual and disturbing introduction... But a war? I feel sorry for his opponents.”

“Oh, you can tell, Lefi? That’s amazing.”

Lefille had indeed perceived Riselette’s true nature, but she wasn’t the only one in the middle of some insightful observation.

“So, Suimei, you got caught up in some trouble again and ended up bringing home these ladies. Does that about sum things up?” Riselette asked.

“A splendid... deduction. I give it... full marks.”

“I am a big fan, you know. Guessing that much was nothing.”

“...Now it just sounds like you’re making fun of me.”

“That’s just... your imagination.”

“Yup, just your imagination.”

After his jovial exchange with Liliana, Riselette did a complete one-eighty and began speaking in a rather serious tone.

“I must say, Suimei, you spent a rather long time wrapped up in this particular incident. Especially by your standards. Did it really give you that much trouble?”

“Sorta kinda.”

“Don’t be afraid to speak up. I’m always willing to lend a hand if you need it.”

“Well, I’m sure I’d be able to resolve things quicker with your assistance, but...”

Suimei found it hard to say any more than that, but Riselette was able to guess where this was going.

“You want to resolve it on your own... Really, I suppose there’s a lot you’d like to settle yourself.”

“That’s about the gist of it,” Suimei replied before clapping his hands together like he’d suddenly remembered something. “Oh yeah! Hey, Your Highness, does the name Sir Ryzeia ring a bell?”

Riselette pensively looked up at the ceiling. He closed his eyes in thought before slowly opening them again.

“...I believe that name appears in the ancient registers. Sir

Ryzeia was one of my nation's knights. That was quite some time ago, though."

"Yeah, I kinda had a feeling that was the case..."

"Has something happened?"

"A friend of mine has inherited Sir Ryzeia's Sacrament."

"I see... Karma runs quite deeply, doesn't it?" Riselette muttered with both an air of sympathy and pity.

Following that, the group continued to chat about the current state of things for a bit longer. But before taking his leave, Riselette had a few parting words of advice.

"Pass this along to your friend, Suimei. The voice he's hearing is the desire lurking deep within him. Giving in to it entirely will lead him to ruin. In no way is everything it says the truth."

And with those weighty words, Riselette excused himself from the house.

"He's really leaving so soon?" Felmenia asked.

"He's a pretty busy guy, after all," Suimei replied.

"The fact that he visited... despite being so busy... means he really must... regard you highly."

"I guess you could say we get along pretty well."

"You mean he rubs your back, and you rub his?" Lefille piped up.

"Something like that."

"He's a nice guy. He even helped me look for Suimei-kun," Hydemary added.

"Ahaha... I guess I'll have to take some cake over to the Kingdom after this is all said and done."

"But this Riselette... He's an extraordinary figure in this world, isn't he, Suimei-kun?"

"What, His Highness? He just might be the strongest living being in the entire world."

"The strongest..."

"In the..."

"Entire world?"

"Yeah, probably."

Or so Suimei casually declared.

Hatsumi vs. Itsuki

A fight was presently about to break out in the garden of the

Yakagi estate. A clash of swords. On one side was Hatsumi of the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani, and on the other was Itsuki of the Quiet Bower School.

Both swordswomen were prepared for battle, squaring off against each other in the garden. But rather than blunt wooden training swords, they were armed with the real deal. The dangerous light glinting off of their metal blades was a testament to the seriousness of this fight.

Hatsumi held her sword parallel to the ground at shoulder height. Itsuki held the tip of her blade behind her in a lower stance, as if to hide it behind her body.

“Here I come,” Hatsumi declared.

“Have at me,” Itsuki quietly replied.

Not a second later, Hatsumi made the opening move with the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani’s Longsword of the Absolute Blade. In essence, it was a strike that was unrestricted by the physical length of a swordsman’s arms and blade—a strike that only swordsmen who surpassed a certain level of skill were said to be able to perform. It was commonly referred to as a cloudsplitter strike because it was said to cleave anything and everything beyond the sword’s blade.

In demonstration, Hatsumi’s slash tore through the trees behind Itsuki and rent them asunder with ease. Such skill stemmed from an esoteric Buddhist ritual, and the phenomenon brought about by it was said to be based on the same thing. But Hatsumi wasn’t the only one with such extraordinary powers. Itsuki responded in kind.

She answered with the Quiet Bower School’s Sword of Ignorance, the Nightingale’s Crossing. Her approach was utterly soundless; both her footsteps and the clinking of her sword faded into nothingness. The complete absence of sound—for just a split second—tricked her opponent’s uncertain senses into seeing something that wasn’t really there.

Perhaps so affected, Hatsumi took her next swing and missed by a wide margin. Seizing this opportunity, Itsuki slipped soundlessly into Hatsumi’s range. When she did, her silent aura engulfed not just her, but Hatsumi too.

Humans are primarily visual creatures, but they also depend a great deal on their hearing. That goes for ambient noises as much as it does for noises we make ourselves. When unable to hear the sound of our own muscles flexing and bones creaking, it becomes

difficult to get a grasp of the way we're moving.

Now, the exact workings behind Itsuki's aura of silence were a mystery. It wasn't clear if they were the result of a martial technique or some magickal force, but said aura of silence was the very foundation of the Quiet Bower. Hatsumi, however, was gradually regaining her senses in spite of it. Or perhaps it was more precise to say that she'd begun relying on entirely different senses altogether.

Pure will alone could cut a swordsman's target. They sharpened their strikes by honing that will, but it was said that true masters could sense such elevated strikes coming before they were ever thrown. It was like a premonition, a visible flash of a blade at the right moment just before it was swung

With this keen sense, Hatsumi intuited the trajectories of both blades a step ahead of Itsuki. She had a swordsman's clairvoyance and swung her blade at the indescribable opening that only she could perceive.

Her strike, which was much like threading a needle with a blade, clearly caught Itsuki's arm. It visibly sank into her skin, yet drew no blood. It didn't even leave a scratch. But behind Itsuki, the arm of one of the dolls sitting in the garden broke off with a clatter. As it did, both girls' field of vision turned into a cacophony of buzzing black and white for just an instant. It was like a flash of white noise from an old television set.

When it cleared, Hatsumi immediately leaped back and took her distance from Itsuki. She knew that losing all sense of color on top of all sense of sound would be too much of a handicap. Even though she'd been struck, Itsuki was still primed for a fight. If anything, it felt like her fighting spirit was kindling as her katana glimmered with a silver light.

"You can still keep going, right?" Suimei asked now that the opportunity seemed to present itself.

In response, both girls turned to him and nodded.

"It's awfully convenient," said Hatsumi.

"Indeed. I didn't think such a thing would be possible," agreed Itsuki.

They were praising the sacrificial dolls Suimei had prepared as a means of subrogating any damage taken in the garden—a demonstration of which had been on full display just moments earlier. This was why the girls dared to put their full strength into

striking each other with real blades. However...

“Good. I’m glad to hear it. But I still feel like the instructor would say this kinda thing isn’t exactly good for you.”

That was Suimei’s estimation of the situation. Because this fight was conducted with the dolls to take damage in place of the combatants, the combatants had far less reason to be as cautious as normal. And with that sense of tension thrown to the wind, this hardly resembled a real fight.

“However, we can cut each other up to our heart’s content. Isn’t that wonderful?” Itsuki countered.

“You seriously have a screw loose,” Suimei replied, shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders.

“But of course. My madness for the blade is proof I’ve embraced my nature as a swordswoman, after all.”

“Gross.”

Suimei looked genuinely disgusted, but Itsuki simply flashed an elegantly demure smile. Suimei didn’t get it. He knew that Lefille wasn’t anything like Itsuki. Her peculiarities had to be unique to this world, for even the spirited Hatsumi seemed affected by such thoughts.

“It really is nice, being able to go at each other until we’re satisfied.”

Hatsumi was in such high spirits, in fact, that Suimei couldn’t help wanting to tease her.

“Ooh, Hatsumi’s becoming more and more of a naughty girl...”

“What on earth are you talking about?!”

Hatsumi blew her lid in a most theatrical fashion, and Itsuki let out a dainty giggle to see it.

“Teeheehee, the two of you sure do get along.”

“Wh-Wh-What are you saying now, Itsuki-san?!”

Hatsumi turned beet red in protest, but all the joking around didn’t last long. The girls were quickly back to locking blades.

“Man, these girls are scary...”

That was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, Suimei’s true impression of them.

Turning Tiny in the Modern World

“Look! It’s the same as always!”

“It really is the same.”

“Just... the usual.”

“Uh-huh. Operating to standards, I see.”

Felmenia, Liliana, and Suimei stood in the garden of the Yakagi estate around Lefille, who was striking a rather daunting pose... ignoring the fact that she was tiny, that is. She was no longer wearing the T-shirt with the kanji for “invincible armada” scrawled down the front. Instead, she’d adopted a simple tee with a teddy bear on it along with a pair of denim shorts. Her shouting in regards to her current state was, as always, nothing more than bravado. She was soon reduced to muttering with a rather complex expression on her face.

“I never thought it would happen here too...”

“It’s not like you used up your power or anything this time, so I wonder what’s going on.”

Suimei cocked his head curiously at this strange phenomenon, but there was someone in the group who was even more confused than he appeared to be.

“This little girl... That’s Lefille-san, right?”

It was none other than Hydemary, who’d never seen Lefille shrink before.

“Yeah, Lefille ends up like this when she uses too much telesma.”

“What? Like she’s overconsuming the power that composes her form?”

“Probably. I’m pretty sure the way she manifests scales with her power for the sake of consistency.”

That was the theory Suimei had come up with regarding Lefille’s transformation while he was in the other world.

“But it’s not like Lefille-san has worn herself out or anything, right?” Hydemary asked curiously.

“That’s right. Isn’t it?” Suimei asked in kind, turning to Lefille.

“Yeah,” she replied with a nod. “But it’s still happened nonetheless.”

Lefille was carrying herself with her usual composure now. It normally brought her maturity and elegance to the fore, but right now, she looked like nothing more than an overreaching child.

“So you think this happens to reconcile with the human portion of your body, which is otherwise unaffected?” Hydemary asked.

“It’s still quite a mystery,” Lefille offered.

“It really is. Even her personality changes,” Suimei added.

He threw that last bit in rather casually, but Lefille vehemently corrected him in a panic.

“M-My personality does *not* change! What are you saying?!”

“You don’t think it does? I mean, you’re always picking fights when you turn tiny.”

“I do not pick fights! I simply try to keep people from making incorrect statements about me!”

Lefille hopped up and down in a fit as she continued to protest. Her speech and conduct really were being influenced by her size, but it seemed she was oblivious to that fact. It was rather sad.

“What do you think, Menia?” Suimei asked, turning to Felmenia for support.

“Huh? You’re dumping this on me? Uh, that’s, um...”

Felmenia averted her gaze and tried to avoid taking a stand one way or another. This was hard for her, given her personality. As such, it was easier for Suimei to turn to Liliana, who wasn’t afraid to say what she really thought.

“How about you, Liliana?”

“I agree. She’s... a little different... from usual.”

“Lily!”

“You normally... wouldn’t be... panicking so much... you know?”

“Urgh...”

“She’s right. You usually come across as more of a composed older sister.”

“I’m composed right now!”

Lefille stood akimbo and pushed her chest out proudly in an attempt to demonstrate her composure. Was she so desperate to cling to her usual image? This only spurred on Suimei’s mischievous spirit, and he promptly went to retrieve a certain something from the house.

“...What’s up, Suimei-kun?” Lefille asked upon his return.

So prompted, Suimei pulled out what he’d gone inside to get.

“Looky here, Lefi. It’s crackling cotton candy.”

“Cotton candy!”

Suimei jiggled about a bag of cotton candy in front of Lefille, who reached up with both arms and a completely enchanted look on her face. It was like Liliana finding a cat, but worse. Lefille was practically dancing around the bag of cotton candy like a fly captivated by a honey trap. Everyone who saw it watched on with

great wariness.

“...”

“...”

“...”

But, preoccupied with the cotton candy, Lefille didn't realize she was being so scrutinized until it was too late.

“Wha?! No, this isn't what it looks like!”

“Oh yeah? Then what is it?”

“Suimei-kun! What a wicked trap! You coward!”

Suimei had no idea what exactly about this made him a coward, but it had certainly made Lefille's current state apparent to everyone. Especially Hydemary, who'd never seen her like this before.

“I'd say there's a palpable difference. Would you like me to make you a doll?”

“You've got it all wrong, Lady Mary! Listen to me! Don't look at me with such pitying eyes!”

Liliana placed a hand on Lefille's shoulder as she desperately pleaded with Hydemary.

“Lefille... Give up.”

Felmenia approached as well in an attempt to console her.

“You are different from your usual self in this state, after all...”

But Lefille couldn't take it anymore.

“I'm me! Nothing more and nothing less!”

“Well, anyways... Let's head over next door,” Suimei suddenly suggested.

“Hwah?!?”

“Oh, I see. That makes sense,” Hydemary said, nodding in agreement.

After all, it only stood to reason that they should show the Kuchibas.

“W-Wait! Don't be so rash! Why would we do that?!?”

“Come on. They're going to be having us over for dinner tonight anyway. You can't avoid them seeing you like this, you know?”

“Th-That may be the case, but...”

Lefille still didn't want it to happen. Thinking back on it, Suimei could recall Rumeya bursting into laughter upon seeing Lefille in this state. It must have been utterly humiliating for her. Suimei knew the Kuchibas weren't going to react like that, but...

“Actually, I’m pretty sure the instructor’s gonna laugh.”

“Nooooo!”

Lefille crouched down and clutched her head. In an offer of support, Hydemary lightly waved her magic wand about.

“Then how about we put on a magic show? And for my next trick, I’ll pull out a tiny Lefille-san!”

“Please don’t use me for theatrics!”

“Then... let’s just get going... already.”

“W-Wait! My heart’s not ready yet! Aaaaaaaaaaah!”

And so, Lefille was dragged out of the garden kicking and screaming.

The Aftermath

After defeating the blond homunculus at the church, Suimei and the others met up with the magicians from the Thousand Nights Association who’d come to take care of the aftermath. One of the younger magicians, who was still older than Suimei, bowed upon seeing him.

“Thank you for your cooperation on this mission, Lord Yakagi.”

“Think nothing of it. Good work out here. How are the captured magicians?”

“We’ve already restrained them with magicka.”

Taking a closer look, Suimei could see for himself that the cultist magicians—including Saix Ruger—had all been bound with the restraining magicka that the Thousand Nights Association favored. In this state, there was no way they’d be able to move freely.

“Then I’ll dispel the curse I cast on them. I’ll be counting on you to handle the rest of the cleanup here.”

Suimei snapped his fingers and quickly dispelled his curse. Just like that, the burns plaguing the cultist magicians vanished all at once. Once that was taken care of, another Association magician approached with his hand to his chin in an arrogant manner.

“Now, Lord Yakagi, what about the homunculus?”

“Hmm? You mean little Miss Genius here? What about her?”

“Not that one! I mean the homunculus you’re carrying on your back!”

This new magician suddenly lost his cool in irritation, which seemed to alarm his companion.

“L-Lord Grace, you can’t speak to Lord Yakagi that way...”

It seemed that the younger magician knew Suimei. Trying to place their acquaintance, Suimei realized that he was one of the Association veterans he’d seen carrying out requests many times before. The angry magician, on the other hand, seemed to be a newbie.

If that were the case, he likely didn’t know all of the Enforcers yet. Behaving so arrogantly around Suimei in spite of his reputation and pedigree, which should have made it obvious he was to be treated with respect, meant... Well, in short, this man was an idiot. And said idiot didn’t heed his senior magician’s advice.

“And why is that? Are we not magicians of the glorious Thousand Nights Association’s magicka department?”

“That’s precisely why I’m telling you that you can’t take such an attitude with magicians from other organizations.”

“We needn’t humble ourselves before an agent—a mere magician that we hand down jobs to!”

Rather than relenting in his arrogance, the haughty magician only ramped it up more. You know the type; they exist everywhere. Those who mistake authority for true strength. Suimei was tired of dealing with his ilk and didn’t really feel like putting up with him after exhausting himself using grand magicka. As such, he let out a terribly enervated sigh.

“Lefi, Menia.”

“What is it?”

“Yes?”

“I’m pretty beat after blowing away the big guy, so if this magician here does anything annoying... use your full power to beat him to a pulp.”

The magicians of the Thousand Nights Association were startled by this declaration. No one had expected Suimei to give his companions permission to resort to violence. Felmenia, however, simply seemed puzzled.

“Is that really alright?” she asked, her head quizzically cocked to the side.

“I don’t care. Use your mana furnace. I’ll permit it up to lower critical pressure. As for Lefi... you’ve still got plenty left in your tank, right?”

“I haven’t had the chance to run wild yet,” Lefille boldly declared as she forcefully thrust her sword into the ground.

When she did, a red shockwave blew through the surrounding area.

“Th-That’s...”

The angry magician stumbled when the shockwave hit him, reverberating in his stomach. If he was here, it meant he had at least enough skill as a magician to be useful for cleanup work in the field. Surely he understood the threat of telesma. But yet again, instead of backing down, he began accumulating his mana

“I’m a magician of the Thousand N—”

“That’s enough!”

The veteran magician roared at him before he could finish his declaration. A powerful psychic chill fell over the area, silencing the arrogant newbie. It was clear that the young magician was the stronger of the two of them, probably ranking somewhere around the adeptus class. But once the veteran was done glaring at the newbie, he turned and bowed to Suimei.

“I apologize for his behavior, Lord Yakagi. Please stow your blade.”

“It’s fine. Pardon me for my behavior as well.”

Suimei politely bowed back in return. The exchange seemed amicable, but this was essentially the only way they could settle things while preserving the reputations of both their respective organizations. Suimei didn’t particularly care if the newbie got the harsh scolding he deserved after the fact. But more importantly, it didn’t seem the discussion regarding the homunculus was over yet.

“Now, Lord Yakagi... I must say we’re not here on a fool’s errand. We’ll require a suitable reason for your refusal to hand him over.”

“Mary.”

When Suimei said her name, Hydemary stepped forward. Naturally, she knew exactly why he’d called on her and immediately cut to the chase.

“We’ll be sending this boy to my father, Edgar Alzbayne.”

“For what purpose?”

“To fulfill the Society’s ideals.”

“We understand the Society’s ideals... but that’s still a little vague as an answer.”

The veteran magician wouldn’t yield for a response like that. It seemed he was rather serious about his duties. Such a capricious answer only encouraged him to be more thorough. But it went

without saying that Hydemary had no intention of yielding either. The two of them glared at each other. It was clear they wouldn't be making any progress this way, so Suimei cut back in.

"Can I say something?"

"What is it, Lord Yakagi?"

"It's critical that we start by setting the situation straight. The worst thing we can do here is get caught up in our emotions. Let's find some common ground and work this out so we can both accomplish our goals." Suimei then looked towards the veteran and asked, "First, you came here to take care of the defeated magicians, right?"

To this, the veteran nodded.

"And my request from the Thousand Nights Association's upper brass was to render the magicians powerless, whether dead or alive. There were no instructions about what to do with the survivors, including no mention of handing them over."

"..."

"Now, let me ask you again just to confirm. Your mission was to clean things up here. Nobody told you that you needed to apprehend everyone, right?"

"That's..."

"And my request was dead or alive, see? So I should be free to take one or two of them with me."

"What sophistry."

"But it's the truth. Besides, you guys have nothing to gain from going out of your way to crush this guy, do you? There's no need to be so fixated on it."

The veteran paused for a pensive moment to give Suimei's reasoning some thought, and eventually...

"Understood. I shall be reporting this, however."

"Yeah, that's fine. It won't be an issue."

Everything was just as Suimei had said. His request from the Thousand Nights Association didn't specify what was to be done with the targets after the fact. As such, they didn't have any right to complain about how Suimei intended to deal with this particular one.

Before long, the magicians from the Thousand Nights Association carried away the other cultists who'd really been responsible for the disturbance. And once everyone else was on their way home, Hydemary turned to Suimei in an unusually honest

manner.

“Thank you, Suimei-kun.”

“It was nothing.”

Suimei, however, was the same as always.

Charge! Battle in the Yakagi Estate Garden!

“So, that’s the plan! Let us put our magicka to practice!”

“Ooh...”

“Mm.”

Felmenia’s energetic declaration rang out through the garden of the Yakagi estate and into the clear blue sky overhead. Liliana and Lefille were nodding along with her. Suimei, meanwhile, had no idea what they were all talking about and was left to observe this all in bewilderment.

“Um, Menia-san? *What’s the plan?*”

“HMMMMM,” Felmenia proudly hummed. “You see, Suimei-dono, upon coming to your world, we’ve discovered a great many things. As such, we’d like to try applying what we’ve learned to our magicka.”

“Okay...”

“And so we’re going to have you evaluate us, Suimei-dono!”

When Felmenia unveiled her great plan, the other two girls provided the fanfare of merry cheering and clapping.

“Well, I guess that’s fair.”

“Granted, we’ll also be using you as our target, Suimei-dono.”

“Uh, objection?”

“Wait! We have a valid reason for this! Our skills cannot hope to match yours no matter what now that you have regained your abilities. As such, Suimei-dono, I believe there is absolutely no need to worry about you getting hurt.”

“Besides... it’ll be faster... for you to assess us... defending against our magicka... directly.”

“I get where you’re coming from. Still, I mean, it’d be one thing if it were my idea... but being told I’m going to be a target is a little off-putting? You know? Like, it kinda makes me want to say no.”

“It’s alright. In the off chance that something happens, we’ll have Lefille cut in and help.”

“I don’t think there’s any chance you would blunder badly enough for that to be necessary, Suimei-kun, but you can count on

me.”

Meaning you'll be my shield? How truly reassuring, Lefille-san.

“...Well, this is basically how I'd have to evaluate you even in normal practice, so I don't *really* mind, but...”

If asked why he was being so stubborn about this, Suimei's only answer would be that mood was of paramount importance when asking this kind of favor.

“We want to surprise you, Suimei-dono!”

“That's right... We want to surprise you... right off your feet... and enjoy seeing... your pathetic display.”

“Hey now! Your supposedly secret motives are starting to leak out!”

“Oopsies.”

Liliana slapped her hand over her mouth as if she'd just realized her mistake—not that Suimei could possibly believe such an act. In truth, he understood where the girls were coming from. Well, Felmenia at least.

“Now, though it may be presumptuous of me to ask, may I go first?” she asked.

“Yeah, go ahead, Menia.”

“Very well. Mana Furnace Core! White Fire, Immediate Critical Load!”

It seemed she was intent on going full-throttle right from the start.

“Whoa, that's your first move?”

Even as Suimei doubted what Felmenia was doing, manalight flickered around her as her mana amplified radically. She then muttered a few words, causing white flames to appear overhead as a magic circle took shape in front of her.

Okay, so she's even got her defenses up while constructing it. Looking good...

Suimei gave a satisfactory nod as he observed Felmenia, who leaped up right into the white flames. The moment she came into contact with them, they flashed with a glimmering light and took on the form of a beautiful white horse.

“Behold! This is my new power!” Felmenia boasted.

“That's just... copying me,” Liliana muttered quietly.

“I-I wasn't jealous of you having something to ride or anything!”

“So you *were* jealous.”

“Yeah, she was totally jealous.”

Felmenia blushed in embarrassment and immediately began her assault in an attempt to hide it.

“Here I come, Suimei-dono!”

Felmenia handled the flaming white horse with considerable skill. Suimei secretly thought the way she maintained her balance while manipulating the reins was pretty cool.

“Not bad. It totally looks like you’re riding a horse.”

“Of course! Equestrian is a most noble hobby!”

“I see...”

It didn’t seem like Felmenia’s magickal horse could outperform a real one, though its maneuverability was still terrific. It was a straightforward spell, certainly, but it played to Felmenia’s strengths. Not only that, but the way its white flames were spreading made it a doubly effective spell.

“The speed and ferocity of a burning field, huh?”

“Exactly!”

Once Suimei had gotten a full taste of the spell, he began disassembling its components. He severed its connection with the Elements and annihilated the source of the magicka with an opposing legend. A red light shot past Felmenia, and her flaming horse vanished without a trace.

“Ah...”

“Mm. It’s not a bad idea. You get full marks for making use of a special skill you possess and working out a way to increase the spell’s effectiveness. I guess there’s still the matter of capacity, though. Can you use that simultaneously with other magicka?”

It was often better to simplify a spell in order to reduce the burden it placed on its caster to maintain it. If they had to concentrate on it too intensely, it could lead to uncertainties in it or other spells. That said, it didn’t seem like that would be too much trouble in Felmenia’s case considering she could compensate for some control of the spell with her horseback riding skills.

“I’ll do my best!”

Moreover, Felmenia was fired up. Seeing her like this, Suimei was sure things would turn out fine.

“You’re up next, right?” Suimei said as he turned to Liliana.

“Yes... This magicka will slap...”

“Wait, slap?”

“Ehem... This magicka will... surprise you.”

Liliana really did hate to lose... The way she crawled into Suimei's bed sometimes was endlessly endearing, so why was she this venomous otherwise? It felt like she was going through a rebellious phase or something.

"Mr. Penguin, Mr. Penguin..."

"Huh?"

"Hmm?"

"What?"

Liliana muttered a new name with her usual curseweaving. And before long, several penguins took shape. There were all pitch black as if painted with ink, but they were still just as cute as could be. The way they spread out both wings like balancing toys and bobbed about with unsteady steps certainly didn't make them seem dangerous.

"L-Lily? What exactly do you..."

"...Plan on doing with something so cute?"

Felmenia and Lefille were both utterly confused by her spell, but there was no denying that these penguins had been kneaded from a curse. Suimei couldn't believe that Liliana had given them this form for no reason. If she'd made penguins, surely they'd be doing something penguin-like. Suimei knew penguins for their remarkable ability to swim with tremendous speed, though that wouldn't exactly be useful here in the garden.

"Penguins... line up."

As Liliana pulled out a small cane and held it up like a tour guide, the penguins fell into formation standing side by side. They looked like an adorable bunch of kindergarteners lining up in front of their teacher, but... the penguins then menacingly turned towards Suimei and lay down on their bellies one by one from left to right. As they took up their positions, small curse bubbles foamed up from the ground.

"Hey, don't tell me..."

"Behold my... penguin... missile barrage!"

"You've got to be kidding me!"

The cursed penguins launched themselves, charging right at Suimei. They darted artfully through the air like normal penguins would underwater. Setting aside the matter of how useful or practical this spell was, it went without saying that Liliana's new magicka was the most shocking demonstration of the day.

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by Gamei Hitsuji

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